

## Prologue

### From the Diary of Zachariah Banducci

*Sarah found this in a chest in William's room. I guess he wanted to read it and it got stuffed into the bottom of the trunk. I never did get another journal from the Commissary like I planned when this one disappeared.*

*Okay. What has happened in the year since I last saw this piece of American Literature?*

*I got my cast off and didn't have much trouble with rehabilitation, though I get twinges now and then in changing weather. That's the good news. The other good news is that the winter was brutally cold and we have a lot of newcomers, mostly from Canada and Alaska. We have a lot of pressure with this increase in population and there is a push to open up another settlement. I am pushing for Santa Fe, but Taos, and some of the towns on West Side, like Montrose. There is still the settlement in Durango which wanted nothing to do with us.*

*They sent a delegation to let us know that the Aztecs were moving up around Santa Fe and Farmington. Nothing more than a few probing expeditions, but they are afraid that they will follow it up with a settlement. It seems that raiders from the Empire have taken a few of Durango's citizens and they are afraid a full blown invasion. This was after we pulled Harry and his Troop out due to lack of activity from the South and hospitality from the Durango Settlement. They have been sent back last month, but haven't reported anything.*

*Carl has proposed a move of some kind into the area and a push against the Aztecs. Others of us want to kill two birds with one stone and establish a settlement. There are some people scattered around and in the mountains above Questa who might join us. Again, when we tried to establish contact, we were discouraged.*

*Anyway, our dealings with the Aztecs are still of the armed friends kind. They sent back the Imperial Valley captives, but didn't like it. There have been trading expeditions to El Paso and San Antonio, so I still get my coffee, thank God.*

*The reavers are still killing each other off. Skull didn't like our little ambush of Red's band and tried another direct assault on Raphael. It was repulsed with heavy reaver loses. We weren't even asked for any help. General March still hasn't been heard from and there are the rumors going around that he is dead, again.*

*The New Africans are still sending refugees over to us for supplies. They are raiding into Canada to round up people to 'sell' to us. Their war with the Caliphate has simmered down. The Mahdists aren't being supplied with troops for their army by the reavers who seem to need all the men they can get themselves.*

*Karl and Eduardo have been keeping the ranch going. Sometimes, I feel like a fifth wheel. One good thing, I get to play with the kids a lot. It's amazing how William has learned to read. He actually likes to practice at the piano and wants Eduardo to teach him to play the guitar. Charlie likes puzzles. He is happiest when trying to figure out something, either verbal or mechanical. Unfortunately, he is very good at taking things apart and we had to reach an understanding on what he can dismantle and what he can't.*

*Sarah is still conducting the Matchmaker Service. She and the rest of the girls are starting into quilting. We have so many bolts of cloth that Karl had to build a sewing shed for them, complete with a heating unit. I think that they go out there to escape from the kids.*

*What else? The west coast states are talking about unifying, again, but no one expects anything to come of it. This has been going on for the last year. I am of two minds about setting up more government than we have now. If there were other powers in the world like in the*

*Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, then I would say 'Yes'. With what we have now, I don't see the need. The biggest power is the Aztecs and they keep getting pressure from the south and are in no position to do much against us. If they make a move, we have the Kansans, Arkansawyers and Texans for allies. We can also count on the Bear Flaggers to step in, too.*

*Well, I have to get ready for a Council meeting. I'm still the Justice of the Peace.*

## Chapter 1

### Turns of Events

*Summer 2047*

Sarah drove Zach into town with William and Charles riding their ponies beside them. Anne and Harriett joined them to do some shopping. Since their interest in quilting grew to a passion, they were buying a lot of cloth and supplies from the Commissary. They had started out on bed quilts, but had come across some manuals by famous art quilters and had taken them to heart. Sarah like Fractured Landscapes by Katie Pasquini-Masopust, Anne liked Dreamscapes by Emily Harrison and Harriett doted on John Michael Matthews, author of Visions: A Journey in Cloth. The sewing room was overflowing with scraps of cloth and the troopers vied with each other to bring the most unusual cloth they could find. It was rumored that a group of rangers went on a long range scout to Paducah, Kentucky to the Quilt Museum to see what was there. The museum had been gutted of quilts, but they brought back some books from the gift shop that had not been taken.

They dropped Zach off at the hotel and made plans to meet him at the City Hall after his meeting. Zach saw Doctor Robert Allen sitting in a rocker on the front porch. He told Zach to pull a chair around and sit. He asked about pain and discomfort and, receiving positive answers, told him to take it easy and to come back if there were any problems. “Otherwise,” he said, “leave me alone to contemplate the day.”

Zach turned and gazed at the surrounding mountains.

“You know, Zach,” he continued. “I had a very successful practice in New York. I was making mid-six figures, running around feeling important. Drove a big car. Married a beautiful

woman who did a lot of charity work. Was looked up to by the community. And I never really looked up, took the time to admire nature and just relax. Too busy chasing the almighty dollar, fame and respect.

“I consider it the luckiest day of my life when my son graduated from medical school and I was out here for his graduation when the hammer fell. I went from a middle-aged fat doctor who smoked while advising his patients to quit, drank while telling his patients to quit and ate rich foods while putting my patients on diets. Since that day, I have lost one hundred pounds, quit smoking and have eaten healthier. I feel like a new man.”

Zach smiled and headed for the Town Hall. On the way, he contemplated what the doctor had said. He, too, had a lot of blessings to count, though getting to this point had involved a lot of grief. He shook off his nostalgic mood with the thought that one never knew what would happen when starting on a new road.

He entered the Council chambers and took his seat. The committees reported with the only problem being the capacity of the sewer system. A sub-committee was appointed to look into the matter and report back in a week's time.

When new business was called for, Carl stood and asked for the floor. He arrived at the podium and thanked Benton. “I have a message from the Detached Rangers. The scout took them towards Farmington where the Aztec incursions were reported and they report that there are Navajo living in the area of the Four Corners. They had a little problem getting to anyone without getting shot, but finally managed it. These Navajo claim everything from Farmington to the southern tip of Lake Powell. From what James Fong could gather, they are pretty spread out and in no condition to hold off a strong push by the Aztecs. I recalled them to Gunnison. Harry McGregor is currently heading there.”

Benton took the podium and said that the situation was two-fold; what to do about Taos and what to do about the Navajo. He opened the topic to discussion.

They quickly came to the conclusion that they could offer a treaty with the Navajo and that was it. The Navajo presented a barrier against the Aztecs and that is what they had been aiming for. Carl suggested that the Navajo may have been the reason the Aztecs were so far east a couple of years ago.

The question of Taos was another matter. Some of the Council wanted to maintain a ranger force in the area, others wanted to send intermittent scouting parties to keep an eye on things and still other wanted to start a settlement, if it was feasible.

The Gunnison representatives supported the new settlement idea. They were getting crowded with the new settlers from Canada. With a new settlement in Taos, they could establish new beef; sheep and llama husbandry areas and set up another sawmill operation. In addition, they would be able to keep an eye on the Aztecs and the Navajo, if necessary.

Zach was concerned about the vulnerability of the settlement. It was over the mountain from Trinidad and Palo Duro and far south of Gunnison. He said that Durango was in a better position to watch the Navajo and had the Animas River running through it for a steady water supply. He felt that the nervousness of the citizens over the incursion would convince them that they would be better off joining with Jefferson.

The back and forth continued until Benton took command of the meeting, again. "Look, here is the first question. Do we establish a new settlement or not? Until we decide that, there is no point in arguing about a location. So, what is the vote of the council on this matter?"

He called roll and it was decided that a new settlement would be created and he threw the meeting open to discussion again. Benton did no more than referee. The locations of Montrose,

Durango and Taos were extolled and denigrated. After a half hour, Benton took a straw poll and Montrose was eliminated as a choice.

Zach's leg was starting to bother him and he was getting tired of the arguing. He informed Carl that his choice was for Durango and scribbled a proxy on a piece of paper. He got up, stretched and left the chambers. Sarah and the others were waiting at the hotel. He explained the situation and told them to go home without him as this was going to be a long session.

"All right," said Sarah. "But we are going to have pork roast with cinnamon and applesauce drizzle and yours will probably be cold and congealed and ugly." The two boys laughed and said 'Eew'. This was one of Zach's favorite dishes and he clutched his chest and fell on the grass, pretending to die of sorrow. The boys laughed and wrestled with their father for a few minutes until he picked them up and set them in the wagon. He threatened to feed them to the pigs if they ate all of his dinner. They waved and drove off and Zach returned to the Chambers.

The arguments had died down and Benton was just calling for another vote. This time, Taos had a clear majority and it was declared the site for the next settlement. Carl was asked to bring Harry to Mitchell and get more details about the area.

A committee was to be dispatched to survey the water, sewer, electrical and housing situation. Carl was to survey the defensive capability and several others would look into resources like timber, coal, minerals and the conditions for raising crops and herds.

They would leave in a week's time with a troop from Mitchell and two from Gunnison. Harry McGregor would lead the rangers comprising of the Detached Rangers, who would be permanently stationed in Taos and Ninth Rangers from Palo Duro.

When a list of candidates to conduct the survey was given to William Smith to compare against chits in the commissary, Benton asked if there was any more new business. Over the radio, Gregory Bronski asked for the floor. When Benton surrendered it, he said, “There has been some discussion here, at Gunnison, about the location of the capitol of Jefferson. A more central location, well, would be more desirable. Mitchell is so far north, though it is still the northern anchor and will continue to remain so, it would be easier with a more central location,” he finished lamely.

Zach laughed at his obvious embarrassment. “What you mean to say is that Gunnison would be perfect, huh, Greg?”

“Now, Zach, it’s not as if this trial balloon hasn’t been launched before.”

“Greg, if you want the headaches of the governor and all, have at it. The only thing I would like to ask is do you want to move the Defense Headquarters there, as well? We just completed the War College.”

“No. Just the civilian administration part. The Defense would still be in Mitchell. We don’t have the room for training and maneuvers, here.”

Benton interjected, “With elections coming up, it would be a good idea to get this settled. We can work with representatives being at a distance, but the governor has to reside in the capitol.”

The rest of the Council agreed and they decided to table the idea for a week, to let everyone think about it. The meeting was adjourned with the representatives agreeing to present the question to their settlements and gauge the reaction.



As they left the room, Carl said to Zach, “You know that Gunnison will win the argument, don’t you? Most of the other settlements don’t care, since they don’t have a dog in the fight and it is logical to have the capitol in a more central, protected location.”

“You know, Carl, it doesn’t really matter to me. I’m not running for governor and I don’t think Sarah is running for governor and the kids aren’t old enough yet to run for class president, much less governor. Things will just be a little quieter around here, that’s all.”

Zach borrowed a horse from Carl and rode home in time for dinner. He told the little community about the new settlement and the proposed change in the capitol. They discussed it among themselves and came to the conclusion that it would actually be a good thing if the capitol moved and there was a little less drama around.

Zach, Karl and Eduardo went through their papers and collected all of the chits they could find. Eduardo and Anne took them to the commissary to trade in for their own and Anne walked to the hospital for her check-up.

Zach repaired some fence line and surveyed the upper pasture where they were cutting hay for winter. The cattle and horses looked fit and there was no sign of screw worms or blow flies. The cold winters usually killed any by late October, though the eggs rarely froze.

Eduardo had gathered all the chits from Jim Gonzalez he could. Anne declared that she wanted the cellar to be finished in stone, that she was tired of the dirt floor. That immediately set off speculation about doing the same thing in Sarah’s and Harriett’s houses. Zach looked at Karl and said, “We sure had better sell a lot of cows, next year.”

During the next two weeks, the members of the expedition were selected. Mike and Tabitha Blaine were in charge of surveying the plumbing and electrical systems. They were bringing their children, making it kind of an adventure. The Council was not happy about it, but

they left it to the head of the expedition. In an aside to Carl, Zach commented, “The head of this expedition is in trouble. Tabitha doesn’t like to be crossed and she is as stubborn as a bulldog.”

Paul and Jessica York volunteered to look over the farming possibilities. They had been looking to move south for a few months, but Gunnison was full and Trinidad didn’t have any good farming except for the plain and that was open to reaver incursions.

Mike and Torrey Stewart from Gunnison were going to look over the possibility for dairy and cattle raising. Though they were not as familiar with the needs for sheep and llamas, they would form an opinion on what conditions were for them.

Corey Braselton was coming in from Eagle to cruise the timber and look for a good site to build a sawmill and whether there was enough flow for a grain mill. Benton commented that at least the new order of things didn’t include environmentalists.

Karl Wetherby was given the task to do a quick survey of the minerals in the area. He had all of the old Land Management and Bureau of Mines maps of the area. He was looking for coal, copper and lead. He would look for a smelter site to process those minerals and melt down scrap metal.

Sally Spires and Greg Bornemann were coming along for any engineering work. In addition, Greg would be able to determine if buildings, bridges, dams and roads were stable.

Carl decided that the One Troop from Mitchell and Fifteen Troop from Eagle, Eighteen, Nineteen and D Auxiliary from Gunnison, as well as Second and Ninth Rangers would form the military detachment. It was Carl’s job to determine choke points and what it would take to get the settlement ready for defense.

An overall leader still had not been picked and Zach's stomach did a flip when he saw the governor riding down the hill in one of the electric cars. He was washing up at the sink on the back porch. The hounds started making a racket and Zach muttered, "I know how you feel."

As Benton got out of the car with a nervous grin, Zach held up a hand to stop his saying anything. "You want me to lead the expedition, don't you, Benton?"

The man looked surprised. "How did you know?"

Zach snorted. "You never come out here. If you want something from me, you either call or send out a trooper. Wait, you were here for the housewarming party, weren't you? But that was by invite and no one invited you this time, did they?"

"Um, well, now that you mention it, I have been remiss in seeing how you and your fine family are. How is Sarah doing?" he innocently asked.

"Oh, don't get all smarmy on me. If you want me to lead your little band of merry men, you can march right in and ask Sarah. I want to see just how much bloodshed there is."

Eduardo and Karl had joined them from the barn, the kids and dogs made a racket and the ladies came from the sewing shed to see what was going on. When Sarah saw Benton, she jumped to the same conclusion as Zach had. She came down the long ramp with which the men had replaced the stairs. Eduardo commenting that with the number of pregnancies, it would be easier and safer.

"When does he leave, Benton?" she asked, entering the porch from the uphill side where the floor was even with the ground.

"I could never fool you, Sarah," he said heartily. "In two days. It will be a walk in the park. Did you know that the Blaines are even taking their children? And there is Sara Spires and

Auxiliary Troop D from Gunnison. Harry McGregor says that there is not anything to worry about. Why, he'll be home in no time."

Later, after Benton had left, Sarah said to Zach, "Well, your stay at home lasted a good, long while, aside from that trip to Trinidad with the draft horses.

"Just how dangerous is it, Zach?"

Zach shrugged and took Sarah in his arms, "Truthfully, it shouldn't be dangerous at all. Harry and the Ninth did a pretty thorough scout. They didn't spot any reavers or Aztecs. The Navajo are pretty far west and seem to want to be left alone. We are too far to worry about Skull or March or the Mahdists. There will be three Troops and the Rangers here, so it will be all right.

"I won't lie to you. My last trip was supposed to be safe, too, and look what happened. We have four troops and two strong and one weak ranger troops and there is the auxiliary troop. Plus, with all of the rest of us, there will be plenty of firepower at Taos and the mountains will be pretty easy to defend."

Sarah sighed and stepped away, putting her hand on her belly. "Sometimes I wonder if I don't have all these babies to have someone if you're killed."

"Ooh, morbid thought. We can't have that. Bad vibes for the bun in the oven. He might grow up to be a mass murderer or a Mahdist or, worse yet, a FUNDAMENTALIST. Maybe, he will be the reincarnation of Pastor Simmons." He did a swoon onto the bed, after making sure that he would hit it, and put the back of his hand on his forehead. As he was lying there with his eyes closed, Sarah jumped on him and pinned his arms with her knees and started tickling him.

"Uncle, uncle," he shouted. "Uncle, aunt, grandmother, anybody. I quit, I quit."

She got off him as the kids tumbled into the room to see what was going on. “What happened?” asked William.

“You dad got his comeuppance, that’s what. Now he knows who still wears the pants in the family.”

Zach held his hand up to his mouth and said in a stage whisper to his grinning offspring, “Yeah, the pants with the expanding waistline.”

Sarah turned on him in mock anger, “I’m sure the kids would help me give you your comeuppance again, mister. So watch it.”

Zach cowered on the bed and the kids jumped on him and they wrestled until there was an ominous crack from the bed frame. Everyone froze and Zach spent the rest of the afternoon repairing the bed.

## Chapter 2

### Exploring Taos

*Summer 2047*

*Looks like another trip for Karl and I. I don't know why I even promise to be a home-body! I am sure lucky to have such an understanding wife.*

*From the maps I have seen, maybe Taos is the best site for a new settlement. With the Aztecs making a move, we need something to close an invasion route on the Western Slope. We would be forming a line with the Bear Flaggers, the Navajo and us. Plus, we need the room. The Canadians are starting to migrate south and join us and the existing settlements are bursting at the seams because so much land has to be used for herds and farming.*

The next day, he, Karl and Eduardo went over the state of the ranch. The travelers had their kit ready and they mounted to leave after kissing their broods good-bye. They were going to spend the night in town in order to get an early start in the morning.

The trip started uneventfully enough. There were six trucks to carry supplies and the families of the surveyors. Rangers and Scouts formed a cordon around the caravan. The weather was cool in the morning and they hit a small rain shower as they started south. Around noon, they met six riders approaching from the east. "If this is trouble," quipped Zach, "I'm going home, now."

They turned out to be from Raphael. They were on their way to Mitchell to report in person, since the radio was not working. They confirmed that the fighting among the reaver bands had intensified. Skull and General March were dead and New Jerusalem was in flames. The people who had stayed or were forced to stay on and work the land were being conscripted,

but there had been some mutinies and the reavers were hesitant to arm them anymore. The smaller gangs were moving east and south to get out of the way. No one knew who was in charge and every big gang was trying to grab as much territory as possible.

There were a lot of refugees from the core of the old Fundamentalist state. Soon, there would not be anyone to farm or ranch for the reavers and they would be raiding.

Raphael asked, in his letter, for food, arms and supplies. The situation was getting critical.

Zach wrote a hasty note to Benton suggesting that they provide as much as possible, including the miscellaneous weapons they had been picking up after battles with reavers, scavenging expeditions and trade. He also mentioned that the refugees would be welcome to settle in Jefferson in Trinidad or the new settlement at Taos.

At Pueblo, they turned west on US50 and met the Gunnison contingent at the junction of US285. They continued down US285 to Alamosa and cut east to Fort Garland, then south on Colorado 159 until it turned into New Mexico 522. There were a couple of breakdowns, but nothing the drivers could not fix.

They met several small communities and families who gave them greeting ranging from mistrust to friendliness. Some were happy about the new settlement and some hostile to the thought. They picked up six families by the time they reached Taos area. Questa was reached at midday and they decided to camp there the first night. The town had been looted, but the buildings were still intact, though weather worn. While lunch was being prepared, One Troop and Ninth Rangers formed a cordon around the town. Carl, Zach and Karl took Second Rangers and rode to the Rio Grande River.

The view was magnificent. Carl liked that it formed an impassible barrier from the west. The mountains protected the city from the east. Guadalupe Mountain provided a lookout to the north and formed a choke point in that direction. As they road south, they encountered another canyon, joining the Rio Grande. This provided another defensive line. They followed this canyon back to Questa then took New Mexico 522 south. This was a two-lane road which was easily blocked and would provide an escape route south while New Mexico 38 provided a way through the mountains to Eagle's Nest then on US64 to I-25 to Trinidad. It would be a grueling trip, but it was possible. They could cut US64 south of Eagle's Nest to protect the route.

When they returned to Questa, Zach asked the surveyors to look over the town to see if it was habitable and what it would take to make it so. Corey Braselton took half of Second Rangers into the hills to cruise the timber. Karl took the other half and the maps showing mines in the area and the Yorks and Stewarts split Eighteen Troop and checked out the farming and cattle possibilities.

By the end of the second day, they had a good idea on the site's possibilities. There were plenty of inhabitable buildings, though some should be pulled down due to damage from a slide east of town. There was a good flow of water and the sewage plant was still operational, only needing a few minor repairs. Most of the homes had solar panels, so electricity was not a problem. The gas pipeline seemed to be flowing freely, but it was an open question on whether the gas coming was from what was in the line or if it was still connected to a field.

The mines in the area were played out, but with the newest extraction methods, the tailings could be mined and some minerals salvaged. There was sufficient timber for a sawmill to be viable and there was enough scrap metal to warrant a small smelter.



While Nineteen Troop was exploring NM38, they met several men from the town of Red River. They were wary, at first, but Tim Scales managed to allay their fears. They said that the reavers had gone through the area years ago and hadn't been back. These men had brought their families to Red River and done some trading with the other families in the mountains at Eagle's Nest and Angel Fire. When Tim asked why they had not gone back, the men said they had but that the Mexicans in the Albuquerque area had raided for slaves and they had relocated to Red River permanently.

Tim brought back two of the men, Gandy Waters and Simon Estes, to meet Zach. They talked well into the night. Zach explained the history of Jefferson and the reason for being in the area. They told him of the troubles they had with the Aztecs and the slave raids which forced them to move to the mountains.

"When we get the new settlement established, you and your families are welcome to join us. We are going to check on conditions in Taos, next. If we do set up a settlement, we will have two troops of mounted infantry and a troop of rangers."

They parted the next morning and the survey party headed towards Taos. Arroyo Hondo was completely destroyed. A fire had swept through it and there were only chimneys and a few brick walls standing. El Prado and Taos were in better condition, though they had been both thoroughly looted. There were signs that Taos provided shelter for regular travelers. A small dump held bones of various ages, though they had been scattered by animals. Some were polished by the weather and others had scraps of gristle. They killed several wild dogs and two bears the first day. Carl ordered double guards while they were there.

The surveyors went out, again. The results were much the same. The Rio Grande also provided a wall near Taos, but there was a lot of open ground to the south. There was a choke

point to the south where Hondo Canyon and NM 68 crossed. The road could be held there with only a few men and a couple of pieces of artillery, but it was a good ways south, about ten miles south of Ranchos de Taos. Karl suggested setting up a force based at the Taos Country Club to support and provide sentries at the choke point.

The only access from the west was US64 across the canyon of the Rio Grande. That bridge could be blown or guarded from El Prado or Arroyo Hondo, which could also block the route from Questa.

While Questa would not support many people, the Taos region would require a large population to provide adequate defenses. They discussed the situation, but could not come to a satisfactory conclusion. Carl said that one troop and a small ranger troop would be fine for Questa, but Taos would take, at least, two troops and a ranger troop to thinly protect it. In reality, they should have three troops and two ranger troops.

Zach asked, "How many would it take to man both Questa and Taos?"

Carl answered, "We are going to have enough trouble to find troops for one or the other, but both? Come on, Zach, be practical."

"Carl, hear me out. Gandy and Simon said there were other people in the mountains. In Red River, alone, there are eighteen families. There are more in Eagle's Nest and Angel Falls. If we get those, or a part of them, to move back to Questa and we get a hundred families for Taos, pull a troop from Mitchell we should have just about enough. The other troops would come from the settlers themselves and we have a ranger troop available in the Detached Rangers. Drop the detached part and assign them to Taos.

"We've picked up six families just marching down here. Let's let the Detached Rangers begin combing the area for others. I would be willing to bet that between families in Gunnison

and Mitchell who want to relocate, the mountaineers in Red River, Eagle's Nest and Angel Falls, the people scattered around and additional refugees from Canada and Missouri, there would be enough to man both."

Carl thought it over for a minute and said, "All right, Zach, you're on. Let split the Second Rangers and send them and the Detached Rangers out tomorrow. One group goes to each, Santa Fe, Farmington and Durango. If they can bring back thirty families and we can get another twenty-five from the mountains, I say we can occupy both. You and I will head to Red River and talk to those folks.

"Karl, you're in charge while we're gone," instructed Zach. "We will have a radio, but I'm not sure what kind of reception you can get when we're in the Rockies. Send a runner immediately, if there is trouble. We will leave you One, Fifteen and Nineteen troops. We will take Eighteen with us."

They four groups left at dawn the next morning. Carl admonished the rangers to be careful when approaching any strangers. "Use your white flag and anyone who doesn't want to talk, let them alone. Understand?" Carl ordered.

Zach and Carl set a good pace to the entrance of the mountains west of Questa. They had around thirty-five miles to cover. They spent noon at the mouth of the canyon where NM38 left the mountain. The started climbing and the road wound through the mountains above the Red River. At one point, the guard rail had been torn open by a boulder. Kwaja Zamir leaned over the side to spit down into the canyon. As he was leaning over the drop, birds erupted from a bush by the side of the road and his horse shied, throwing him off balance. He scrabbled for a hold, but lost his seat and fell.

Carl ordered the troopers to stay away from the drop and he and Zach looked over. They saw Kwaja's body at the bottom. Jimmy Williams, the troop leader, rappelled down the cliff, using the ropes carried along by the troopers. They recovered the body and wrapped it in a blanket and tied it to his saddle. Carl admonished the troopers for taking this journey as a joke, "Any more screwing around and the doer is going to suffer the consequences."

A more subdued group headed out. They reached the town of Red River after dark, first calling out their identities and requesting Gandy Waters or Simon Estes. They waited while the two men were brought.

Gandy invited them into town and had a couple of the men lead them to the building that served as a stable. He gave permission for them to stay the night and bury Zamir. The body was carried to the small church and laid before the altar. An honor guard of four men would stand watch through the night.

"We didn't expect to see you people so soon," said Gandy. "What's up?" He led them to the town diner where the town was sitting down to supper. Despite their protests, the troopers were seated and served first. The fare was bear meat, potatoes and canned vegetables. They fell to with a will and then evacuated the tables for the townspeople.

While they were eating, Carl ordered several of the troopers to open the MREs and pull out all of the deserts and bring them back. When they returned, the candy, pudding and the rest were placed in a big bowl and given to the children.

"We would like to talk to everybody. Do you mind if the troopers take over guard duty from your people?" Zach asked.

"Well, no, I guess not," answered Gandy, rubbing his nose.

When everyone was gathered, Zach told them of the plan to hold both Questa and Taos. How it would take three troops and two ranger troops and that they would provide two troops and a ranger troop, but they needed to form another troop of each from the locals who joined them.

He explained the Jefferson constitution and the requirements for service by males and the voluntary service by the females and the role of the rest of the community in the militia. He detailed the use of personal chits and how they were redeemed. The establishment of the commissary and personal items was among the most controversial topics and Zach was sweating by the time the meeting ended. Carl handled the questions while Zach collapsed into a chair.

“I don’t know about the rest, but I’m mighty tired of sitting in these mountains and freezing every winter. I’m taking my boys to Questa as soon as I can get packed. This is the best opportunity we’ve got to stop living like scared rabbits and I’m going to take it,” announced an elderly man named Jonas Smith.

His words were greeted with applause and offers of other families to join in the exodus from the mountains. One man asked about quarters, saying that he had a home in Questa. Carl assured him that they would move into their old homes, as long as they were safe. He assigned a trooper to get the addresses of the homes in question and promised the townspeople that he would mark the buildings to keep any other settlers out.

He said that they had six trucks they could send to help transport their household goods and the salvage from the town. Carl explained, when asked, that they would dismantle the town and Moya, down the road, when the population left. All windows, door, fixtures, wiring and anything else that was considered useful would be brought down to the new settlement. They

would leave a few buildings for emergency shelter. He explained that they did not have the facilities to manufacture sinks, toilets, glass, wire or the thousand other things they were used to.

When the questions ran out, a man at the back of the room stood up. “Excuse me, but I have one concern, if you don’t mind.”

Zach motioned him to continue and he said, “My name is the Reverend James Blackstone and I would like to ask about worship.”

Zach explained that there were no restrictions on personal worship, as long as it did not interfere with anyone else. He explained about Pastor Simmons and how he tried to shove his brand of Christianity down everyone’s throat. He also told them of the Sikhs in Palo Duro and the Jews that had been a part of the community in Mitchell and, later, Palo Duro. “The only problem we have with religion is getting it forced on us,” Zach said. “That’s why we have a problem with Sharia law. The Mahdists insist that everyone follow it. And it doesn’t matter to us if it is the moderate version or the Wahabist version. It was religious law and, therefore, forbidden under the constitution.”

“You might want to know what you are up against, too. We have friends out there. There’s the Sioux and the Mormons to the north. The Sioux claim all of the plains and the Mormons have set up a separate ‘country’ called Deseret. It takes up most of old Utah and Idaho. To the east are the remnants of the Fundamentalists. They have pretty much shed their radical form of Christianity and are pretty closely aligned with our beliefs in individualism and self-reliance, supported by a strong community and a universal military. We have had combined operations against the reavers with them and with the Texans down by Houston. The whole west coast has five republics or states and we have trade and defense treaties with them, too.

“On the other side, there are the Mahdists, who we were running from when we established Mitchell. The Aztecs have been a minor irritation, but we have a working relation with them. They trade with us and are supposed to return all captives taken north of the border.

“The reavers are another kettle of fish. They are a loose conglomeration of raider gangs that live by rape and pillage.

“There is another group with which we have an on-again, off-again relation with. These are the New Africans around the western Great Lakes. They are currently at war with the Mahdists. We tried to help them once, but it didn’t turn out too well. We keep them at arm’s length, now.

“Oh, there is a colony of Israelis who have moved to Cuba. Most of the Jews from Jefferson joined them. The island was uninhabited, except for packs of wild dogs that killed everything they could get to for food. The Israelis are reclaiming the island and have spread out from Havana. There are twenty to forty thousand of them.”

Zach took another drink of water and looked around for more questions or statements. There were none and the group broke up into clusters to discuss the proposal. Several men came up to shake Carl’s and Zach’s hands.

The next morning, they buried Kwaji Zamir in the small graveyard the citizens of Red River used for their own dead. The ceremony was presided over by Reverend Blackstone. Zach and Carl gave eulogies and several of the other troopers spoke.

After the ceremony, the troopers got ready to return to Taos. Two young men with horses and pack mules approached them and asked if they could join them. “My name is Bob Waite and this is my cousin Jack Connors. We packed last night and there is nothing else here that we lost.”

Zach looked at Carl, indicating that the decision was his. Carl looked over the weapons of the two men and nodded. They were assigned to the troop, temporarily. Their permanent assignments would be determined when they got back to Taos. Introductions were made and the troop set off, waving good-bye to the townsfolk.

The trip back was uneventful and they made good time. Zach and Carl discussed the fate of the two new recruits. Since they were woodsmen, Carl thought they should join the rangers and Zach concurred.

When they returned, there was still no word from any of the ranger troops. The survey of Taos, Rancho de Taos and the surrounding countryside had gone well. Zach sent a message to Mitchell and Gunnison telling them to start recruiting settlers for Taos. The trucks were emptied and Fifteen troop escorted them to Red River.



## Chapter 3

### A Surprise for Sarah

*Summer/Fall 2047*

*Taos is a great location, according to Carl. It is easily defended and the area has plentiful resources. The only hole I can see is that both Questa and Taos need to be populated. Questa would be subject to an attack from the Taos direction and Taos from the north. Somehow, we have to gather enough settlers to occupy both. I'm glad Carl sees it my way.*

*The people from the Red River, Eagle's Nest and Angel Falls are a good start. I just hope we can pick up enough more to do the trick.*

The Second Rangers, which had been sent to Santa Fe returned. Carl and Zach had Gary Miller report to them in the temporary headquarters they had set up in an office in the Town Hall. He arrived carrying the panniers off one of the pack horses. He had a sly grin as he set them in a corner. Carl told him to sit and give his report.

“We zigzagged down towards Santa Fe and the funny thing is, we didn't see a soul. There wasn't a fire or a body anywheres. There were a lot of cows and other animals, but no one herding them. All the houses we found were empty and looted, but not burnt.

“We got to Santa Fe in the evening and we camped outside of town. It was looted, but not too thoroughly, from what we saw. We listened for noise, tried to smell smoke or see light, but, even from the church tower there was nothing. The next day we spread out and searched until we got to the town center, but there was still nothing and nobody, except some stray dogs and cows and sheep and goats and stuff.

“The police station had been looted, so, well, we headed for this big bluff outside of town. When we got there, Tim Stewart climbed up with a radio. While he was doing that, we looked through this house at the bottom, but it had been looted, too.

“There was this old western town, looked like a movie lot or something, that someone had turned into a tourist attraction. The buildings were complete, some of them anyway, but there wasn’t nothing there either.

“Anyway, Tim finally got to the top, but he didn’t see any smoke or light or people. He tried to report, then came down and we kept on south towards Albuquerque, on I-25. Just north of town we finally saw somebody. They were in the fields. It looked like they were working, but there were a lot of men with whips and guns riding horses. We figure they were slaves.

“Weren’t all the slaves supposed to be sent back? ‘Cause there was a lot of blonds and light-skinned people and some blacks, too.

“We wanted to get out of there, but a bunch of riders with dogs were coming. We hid in an arroyo, but they weren’t looking for us. They were laughing and whooping it up and they turned towards Redondo Peak. We thought about getting one of the slaves, but they were watched real close. We waited ‘til night and headed back to Santa Fe; there was something we wanted to pick up.

“You know that lady Sarah likes for her quilts? Well, I knew that we were coming down here and Sarah mentioned that she lived in Santa Fe, though she must be over eighty. You know, when she was talking to someone else in the Commissary. Anyway, the street was by that big bluff and the western town, so we went back there. The house had been looted of guns and food and stuff, but there was this one room where there was sewing machines and stuff.” He went to the panniers and opened one side and began pulling out squares of cloth. “These were scattered

all over the floor, but, well, we kind of thought that Sarah would like them, coming from her house and all. We were going to get a sewing machine, but they were all busted up.”

Zach sat there amazed. These boys were facing a hostile environment. They were in a mystery where everybody was missing, like in an old B Horror Flick. Yet, they stopped and picked up a bunch of fabric for Sarah. He wished someone thought enough of him to do something so unselfish. They thanked Gary for the report and dismissed him.

:Oh, no,” he said. “That’s not the best part.” He went to the second pannier and brought out something wrapped in plastic. “When we were picking up this stuff,” he said pointing to the cloth. “Gary, you know, Gary Crocker was going through the house. He’s apprenticed to Bill Santini and he’s always looking at the way things are built. Anyway, this house had been added to and one of the additions was an entryway. Sort of a mud room, but why they would need a mud room is beyond me.

“Well, there were benches in this room and it struck Gary that he would have built them with seats that could lift and have storage in them. But these didn’t lift. Then Gary noticed that they were nailed shut with brads. He noticed because he would have countersunk them and puttied the holes, but these hadn’t been. The upshot was that he forced open the seats and we found these things.” He drew out two plastic wrapped packages and a box ten by twelve, six inches deep and a note.

Zach picked up the note. The writing was a shaky scrawl, but legible. He read: “We don’t have room for everything. I loved these two most. One to remind me of Bobby and one to remind me of Richardson Grove. If someone finds them, I hope they can use them. The other two are just there cause they may be the last copies on earth by the time this is over. The kids are calling. Katie.”

Gary had opened up one of the packages and held up a beautiful quilt, done in warm tones of red, orange and yellow. "It's one of the ones in the book called Reflections," he said. "We looked through it one night. It was a bunch of quilts with everything having to do with stuff reflecting in other stuff. You know, in water, on spoons, pots, snow and such. This one is called "Reflections of Bobby". It's some guy dressed like a cowboy and he's reflected in an eye."

He held up the other one. "This is called "Redwoods II". We found something like it on the cover of another book.

"We thought Sarah might like them." He suddenly seemed embarrassed. "There tags on the back with the name and date and her name, Katie Pasquini-Masopust.

"Do you think she'll like them? I guess it was kind of stupid, huh," he finished, dropping the quilt into the pannier.

"Gary, it wasn't stupid. I know that she will really like them and I want to thank you and the others. This is really great. I mean it, really great." Zach stood, came around the desk and shook Gary's hand. The ranger brightened and beamed a big smile, ducked his head to Carl and rushed out.

Carl had opened the box and took out twelve books. Ten were by Katie Pasquini-Masopust and dealt with quilting. Another was called Anatomy of Domestic Animals by Chris Pasquini, DVM MS; Tom Spurgeon, PhD; and Susan Pasquini, DVM. The last one was a paperback western called The Cowboy and the Farmer by Mark Pasquini.

He held up the last book and said, "At least there is one I can understand. A lot of Pasquini's. Must be relatives of some kind. Next time we hit a big library, I'm going to see just who these guys are.

"It was a nice gesture, the quilts and all."

Zach nodded and put the quilts back in the bags and the books, minus the western which Carl had started and took them to his room at the hotel. Later, he thanked every ranger individually.

The other rangers had more luck. By the end of the second week, families and individuals were coming in. The Taos Rangers had discovered isolated farm, ranches and tiny communities. They had convinced thirteen families and several individuals to join them. The other half of the Second Rangers found Farmington burned to the ground, but had discovered seventeen families and individuals that would join them.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Red River were moving down the mountain, six families at a time, using the trucks to transport their goods.

In all, fifty-five families and thirty-five individuals were added to the population of the Taos Settlement. In addition to the new troop formed from the Jefferson settlers, the reformed Eleven Troop and the Twelfth Rangers with the Detached Rangers forming the cadre, they were able to add two other troops and a ranger troop. There were still three families at Eagle's Nest, but Angel Falls had been cleared out. The town and any cabins in the area were the first to be dismantled and brought to Taos.

The Commissary had been set up first. It was in a cavernous building capable of holding the supplies. The first settlers from Jefferson arrived at the beginning of fall. Grady O'Malley had been appointed Mayor until elections could be held. Toni Soleto was given the job as commissioner. Her husband had given her a good grounding in the accounting field before he had been killed.

A week later, after most of the new settlers, both local and from Jefferson, had arrived, the survey party left for home. The Ninth Rangers headed for Palo Duro. The rest road north,

retracing their route. They dropped off the Eagle and Gunnison contingents and arrived home in time for the harvest.

Zach brought home the Second Rangers and they presented their gifts to Sarah as a unit. She was overcome and cried buckets. The other ladies admired the quilts and they spent the next day deciding where they should hang them.

The unit was invited to a party, with their families the next weekend. Of course, it was also an event for Matchmaking, Inc.. The day was spent in eating and drinking and playing games.

While getting the ranch ready for the party, Zach brought up the addition of Mary King and her baby to the ranch family. Sarah explained that the girl was having a difficult time with the baby. “She’s just a baby herself. I thought we could invite her here and, well, adopt her and help her cope. Kay is the same age, you know, and Mary has had such a hard life with that beast that owned her. I know I should have asked, but you were gone and, after Regina Ford killed herself and her children, I didn’t want something to happen to Mary.”

Zach kissed her and assured her that there was no problem with adding two more to the mix. He asked about Regina and Sarah told him the story.

It appeared that Regina was depressed that so many of the other captives had found someone and she thought that it was because of the scar on her cheek. Zach snorted, “If she is the one I am thinking of, that scar was no more than a rough patch. From what I understand, her standards were too high and she had a sour attitude.” Sarah agreed with his assessment, but said that it plagued her and she began imagining that her children were deformed, too. One day she took a walk up to the Leaning Tree, where Wade Hampton had been discovered as a traitor and she jumped with the kids. They only found her because of the vultures.

Edna March, the psychiatrist, had started a new counseling program immediately after. The note Regina left was a cry for help. Now, all refugees had to go through counseling.

With fewer people in the community, there was more work that fall. The harvest took precedence over the yearly slaughter, but both had to be done before winter set in. Wood and coal were a necessity, also. When there was cloud cover, there was no other source of heat.

The fall chores were finished in time for the first blizzard of the season. The settlements celebrated Thanksgiving with a feast at the school. Father Jonathon Tillford gave the blessing and Reverend Paul Hind gave the benediction.

It howled for three days, turning the world white and confining the settlers to their homes. They made only brief forays when the wind and snow took a pause. During the storm, Zach, Karl and Eduardo kept a pathway between the houses and barns open and, of course, the sewing shed.

During the winter, the women worked feverishly on a quilt, getting it finished by Christmas.

## Chapter 4

### Trouble in Taos

Spring 2048

*Setting up the colony in Taos went better than expected. There were a goodly number of settlers in Mitchell and Gunnison who moved (thank God Karl and Eduardo decided to stay). It was pretty amusing to see the number of marriages that resulted from the creation of Twenty-five troop. Those young men and women found each other, with Sarah's help, almost obscenely fast. It was like an assembly line getting them hitched. We coined a new phrase, 'Taos bride' to identify a couple that went through a quick courtship and marriage.*

*With the number of families brought in from Red River, east of Taos and the interior mountains, they were able to set up the two additional troops and the ranger troop. Carl is a little concerned that the Questa group didn't want to integrate with the Taos troopers, but that was the decision of the local commander, Ed Soletto. I have a feeling that Ed was under pressure from the mountaineers.*

*The weather warmed a little for Christmas and we had another gathering at the school. Mrs O'Grady was able to put together a Christmas program put on by the kids and we all sang carols and there was a play, A Christmas Carol, by the adults living in Mitchell. William Smith really hammed it up as the Ghost of Christmas Present. There was a ceremony marking the end of the evening. Sarah, Anne and Harriett called the members of the Second Rangers to the stage and presented them with a quilt, in the fractured landscape style, a line of line of troopers with*



*the Second Ranger pennant, moving through trees. Todd Spires thanked them and promised to hang it in the Second Ranger barracks.*

*There was a tragedy to mar the winter. At the first of the year, four of the children in Big Valley were sledding when a storm hit. We figured they got turned around in the wind and were lost. Search parties went out for several days, but they weren't found. Steven Rosaia insisted the search be called off when he was forced to amputate frost-bitten toes and fingers. Hopefully, we will find the bodies before animals do.*

*The elections will be held in May. The conventional wisdom is that the capitol will be moved to Gunnison and no one from around here is running for governor. I have tried to get William Smith to run for mayor, but he says that he has no time. Then, he led a 'Draft Zach' movement, that I put a quash on. JP is bad enough, but mayor? I get the chills thinking about it.*

*The livestock has come through the winter in fine shape. We are looking for a fine crop of foals and calves in spring.*

*Speaking of offspring, Sarah, Anne and Harriett are close to dropping, too, though I avoid that term when they are around. Anne says it makes them sound 'bovine' and I took the hint. Mary King, who was introspective and quiet, has blossomed. Under the tutelage of the women, including Kay, she has gained a lot of confidence in caring for her baby as well as helping with the rest of the 'wild herd' around here. A snow fight, these days, looks like a small war.*

Spring arrived and Zach, Karl and Eduardo spent their time in the foaling pens. It seemed all the mares dropped in the middle of the night. While the majority had no problem, there had to be a round the clock care to make sure that any problems were handled. When the

problem was more serious than they could handle, they had to put a call into Carl Llewellyn, the veterinarian. He brought out his trainee, Ed Young, when Ed was available.

Ed was a shy, good looking young man and Kay and Mary seemed to always be available to help when he was around. Karl would nudge him and say, "Got yourself a couple of groupies, there, Eddie." Ed would turn bright red and begin to perspire.

One morning, after a particularly rough night, Sarah mentioned that Ed Young had come to talk to her. Zach was soaking in the tub and was half asleep and grunted. "Ed asked if I thought the two girls were too young to get married." Zach grunted again, knowing that Sarah was speaking, but not absorbing what she was saying.

"Zach," she said, loud enough to break his reverie and startle him into slopping water on the floor.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She repeated her statement and Zach groaned. "Are we going to lose one of the girls? Well, I'm glad you brought Mary here. At least one of them will still be around. Maybe we ought to adopt another one. What do you think?"

Sarah looked up from feeding the baby and smiled at the bathroom door. "I told Ed he had to speak with you, since you are the father."

"Oh, good. I can get my gruff act down so I can be ready for little Sarah or Hannah's suitors. Maybe, I can practice throwing him out the door."

"Zach, you will do no such thing. Ed's parents are you some of your oldest friends. It would be an honor to welcome him into the family.

"Did you hear me, Zach? Be nice."

Zach came out of the bathroom and began rummaging in drawers for clothes. “Woman,” he said, assuming a regal manner. “You are speaking to the master of the house and I will have you know, my word is law and I will brook no lip from the scullery maids.”

Sarah rolled her eyes and patted her newborn, Karl. “As long as you don’t consider me a scullery maid, buster.”

Zach came over and took Karl and whirled the boy around, ignoring Sarah’s admonition to be careful. He told her to get some rest and took the baby to Kay to put down.

Later that afternoon, Zach and Karl had joined Eduardo at the corral where the newborn foals were capering in the spring sunshine. They were discussing which stallions should cover what mares when they came into season. They looked up as Ed rode into the yard. He was dressed in a coat and tie.

“I think this is for me, boys. A young Lothario has come to call,” said Zach, stepping away from the other two.

The young man turned bright red under Zach’s gaze, who finally invited him to step down. Zach led him up to the porch and indicated a chair. Ed had to clear his throat twice before he was able to refuse Zach’s invitation for refreshments. They spoke of the foals and the successful increase among the herds and hounds.

Zach let the small talk wind down and there was an uncomfortable silence, which Zach did not try to break. He figured that Ed had the question and he should ask it. As the silence stretched on, Ed suddenly jumped to his feet and said good-bye.

As he moved towards the steps, Zach took pity on him and asked, “Your nerve broke?”

Ed stopped and slowly turned. “No. Yes. I mean, no.” He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders and almost marched to stand in front of Zach. “Sir, I have come to ask

you something.” He hesitated again, then continued, “I would like to ask for, for the hands of Kay and Mary.”

Zach was stunned after Ed blurted out his request.

Sarah came out of the house and took Ed’s arm to lead him inside saying, “We’ll leave Zach to catch his breath, shall we?”

“Wait a minute,” Zach managed to spit out. “Both of them?” He grabbed Ed and tugged him from Sarah’s grasp. “Sit down!” Ed sank apprehensively into the chair.

Zach rounded on Sarah, “You knew about this, didn’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to Ed. “Both of them? Have you talked it over with them, Kay and Mary?”

Ed nodded and looked even more nervous, “Yes, sir. They said that they were a team, sir.”

“A TEAM!” shouted Zach. He saw the effect his shout had on Ed and apologized. He collapsed into his seat. “Okay, let’s calm down.” He turned to Sarah and asked her to bring out the girls.

He turned back to Ed. “I’m sorry, Ed. You caught me by surprise. I thought that you would take one or the other, not both. Sarah needs the help with the children and the household chores. And Mary. Mary has had a rough time with her daughter. Do you think they are ready for this?”

Before Ed could answer, Sarah returned with Kay and Mary. Zach presented Ed’s proposal to them and they began grinning and ran to Ed and kissed him. Sarah was carrying a tray with glasses and a cold bottle of Rosaia champagne. Zach leaned back and laughed, bowing mentally to the inevitable.

After calling the rest of the ranch together, they drank a toast to the newly betrothed. They had to open a new bottle of champagne for the successive toasts and sat down to eat.

During dinner, Kay tapped her glass and rose. "We have something to ask Zach and Sarah," she said. "Mary and I have been talking about this a lot. We love it here and don't want to leave. So, Zach, Sarah, we would like to know if we, Mary, Ed and I, can live here after we get married."

Mary hurriedly interjected, "Not here in the house, of course. Only for a little while, until we can build our own house. Ed would be here to help with the stock all of the time, too."

Zach looked at Sarah and lifted his hands as if to say, 'you make the decision'.

"We are getting a little ahead of ourselves, girls," said Sarah. "The wedding won't be for a couple of months. There will be plenty of time for a cabin raising. Ed, I am sure that your troop will be happy to help build your house.

"Next Sunday we will speak with your parents, Ed. As a courtesy. Unless they have a catastrophic problem with the match, we will post the bans the next Sunday. They will be read for three weeks and the dresses will have to be made and there will be parties and preparations for the wedding. There are a lot of things to be done and that will give you plenty of time to build the house."

That night, Zach and Sarah talked about the coming nuptials. Zach said that he thought that they should give the newly betrothed a hundred hours of services from the electricians, plumbers and to set up the house from the commissary. Zach mused that he could get Carl to send Two Troop, of which Ed was a trooper, on a scavenging expedition. The troopers could and had picked up many useful things that made their way to a troop's newlyweds instead of the commissary.

When Sarah and Zach went to the commissary to put their plan in motion, William informed Zach that he would have a hundred and thirty hours on the books, with all the chits he was buying and the wedding party supplies. Edna March, who had just stepped into the store with Tess Parker, said, “The Council could help with that, Zach.

With the feeling that the other shoe was about to drop, Zach asked, “How would it do that, Edna? Allow an overage?”

“Oh, no,” she replied. “We could not do that. It would set a bad precedent, you know. No, I was thinking of a message we received this morning from Taos. Why not see Benton? I’m sure he can explain it to you.” She smiled and began searching among the stack of jeans.

Zach looked at Sarah and shrugged. “We might as well get this over with,” he said. They wished William, Edna and Tess good-bye and walked across to Benton’s office in the Town Hall.

Benton was just leaving when they arrived. Zach gently pushed him back inside and followed Sarah into the room. “Ah. Zach and Sarah,” he said. “What can I do for you, today?”

“We are having a wedding at the ranch and we seem to be a little overdrawn at the commissary. Edna March suggested I see you about a message you received today. What’s up?”

Understanding dawned on Benton. “Yes we did receive a message from Taos. From Thomas Fahrner.”

Zach interrupted, “I thought Ed Soleto was senior advisor. All messages should come from him, that’s the protocol.”

“Well, it seems that Tom is concerned about Ed. There seems to be a situation developing and Carl and I, and the Council, think that we need to send someone to look into it.

“Carl is busy with the replacement troop and training. We were thinking of sending Robert Agnello down, but, if you need the hours, you would have been our first choice. However, the foaling and calving, we thought you might be too busy.”

“I am,” snapped Zach. Sarah laid a hand on his arm and asked, “Just what seems to be the problem, Benton?” she asked.

“We don’t know. Tom wasn’t too particular, just said that there was a situation developing.”

“What do you want done?” Zach asked, calmer now.

“We want someone to go down there and investigate. See what has Tom concerned. You would have the full cooperation of the Council to replace or promote or whatever. It would take a couple of weeks, at most. Carl was planning on taking two of the pickups and Fourth Rangers. A day or two to get there and a day or two to resolve the situation and a day or two back. What could be simpler?”

Zach looked at Sarah and she nodded. “Okay, Benton, you have me over a barrel. I’ll go on the condition that I get, at least, three weeks credit, or the actual amount, if it takes longer.”

Benton immediately agreed and said that all would be ready in the morning. He shook Zach’s hand and led them out of the office, assuring them that he would inform Carl of the plan.

On the way home, Zach apologized to Sarah, but she would have none of it. She told him she understood and that they were doing this for the kids and that he would be under foot, anyway.

Karl tried to convince Zach that he should go to, but Zach knew how many mares were still in foal and that Eduardo could not handle it by himself. Zach was adamant and Karl finally conceded, but with poor grace.

The next morning, Zach kissed his family good-bye and rode into town. Paul Diggs and the Fourth Rangers were ready; their gear packed in the trucks. They drove south on I-25, bypassing Denver, and on to the junction with NM64. Zach wanted to see how the road through the pass was holding out.

In several places, small slides or avalanches had to be cleared, but they made good time. They met the mountaineers who had remained in Eagle's Nest and left them some supplies. They passed the turnoff to Angle Fir and took a detour to look at the spot where the road was blocked from the south.

They reached Taos late in the day and stopped at the hotel, which had been turned into a barracks for the two troops and the ranger troop that were assigned to Taos. While the Fourth Rangers took the supplies to the commissary, Zach and Paul walked into the hotel.

There was noise coming from the restaurant and they entered the room to find Eleven Troop eating and drinking. The two men stood by the door taking the room in. Finally, one of the troopers noticed them and he whispered to the others at his table. Slowly, the room quieted and all the troopers were staring at them. The only other person in the room was slumped at a table in the corner.

With a sinking feeling, Zach walked across the room. Troopers began to rise, but he told them to sit down and stay put. Something was very wrong here and, he guessed, it was going to get worse. The man with his head on the table was Ed Soleto. An almost empty bottle of Scotch stood at his elbow. An overturned glass was near his hand.

Rupert Winfield, one of the snipers from the reaver ambush, was sitting at a nearby table. He was slumped down in his chair as if trying to hide his bulk. Zach beckoned him over and



asked where their officers were. The trooper tried to make excuses, but Zach cut him short and asked the question again, this time in a quiet voice.

All the troopers knew that voice. It meant that Zach was about to explode. Rupert began to sweat and mumbled that the officers were on guard duty. Zach was puzzled. “Why are the officers on guard duty, Rupert?” he asked.

“It’s like this, well, we wanted to eat and, we, I mean, all of us, well,” his voice trailed off.

Zach stared at him for a few seconds and glanced back at Ed. “Get some coffee, please,” he asked Rupert.

“There isn’t any. I mean we don’t have any made,” he replied, sweat running down his face.

Zach slowly turned and shouted, “Well, make some then.”

The trooper almost ran for the kitchen.

Paul Diggs was still standing in the doorway, preventing the troopers from leaving. Several made a move towards the door, but changed their minds after seeing the look on Paul’s face. They ended up milling like a herd of restless cattle.

Zach sat at Ed’s table and shook him. He mumbled and swung his arm, knocking the bottle, which would have fallen if Zach hadn’t caught it. Rupert hurried over with a cup of instant coffee. The stuff looked bad, but Zach held up Ed’s chin and poured it down his throat.

He began sputtering and spitting and took a swing at Zach. Disgusted at having the hot liquid slop over him, Zach hauled Ed to his feet and helped him stumble out of the room.

On their way out, Zach told Paul to keep the troopers inside. He walked a struggling Ed into the street. Zach shook him and shoved against the wall. Ed swung and scraped his ring

across Zach's cheek, cutting it. Zach slapped Ed, back and forth, until he slid down the wall to sit on the sidewalk.

"Listen to me. You're a disgrace. Where is Tom?"

"Gone. Tom's gone. Leave me alone."

At that moment, Cynthia Soleto came up. "Oh, Ed. Zach, I'm so sorry you had to see this. Let me take him home." Zach pulled Ed to his feet and Cynthia took him and started up the street.

Zach looked around, and then went back into the restaurant. He pushed past Paul and the troopers gathered at the door. He began sliding tables out of the way and bunching chairs against the wall opposite the doorway.

When he was finished, he told Rupert to get the men seated and then to get someone from Twenty-five Troop. The big man hesitated and said, "Zach, Twenty-five is gone. They left this morning to take out after the Twenty-Six and Twenty-Seven troops."

Zach wearily said, "Get the men seated, will you?"

As the troopers were being marshaled to the side of the room, Zach asked Paul to find the officers of the troop and bring them to the restaurant. The Fourth Rangers were to take over sentry duty, if necessary.

He turned to the troopers. "I don't know what is going on here, but I will find out. Rupert, you said Twenty-five Troop had gone after the others. What did you mean?"

"Last night Twenty-Six Troop had the watch. When we got up, they were gone, and Twenty-Seven Troop was, too. Ed found that out when he went to the end of the valley and found that the militia from Questa had taken their place.

“Ed, he and Tom got together and talked to the men there and they said that, if we didn’t have the guts to stand up to the Mexicans, then their boys did.”

Under further questioning Zach pieced the story together. The families in Questa had been agitating all winter to attack the Aztecs as soon as the roads opened in the spring. Tom and Ed spoke against it and the people in Taos supported them.

The Questans insisted that the two troops made up of their people not be integrated with the two troops from Jefferson. Two camps formed, one centered in Taos and the other in Questa. There was no solid break, but there was a lot of tension between the two groups.

The morning things broke was the morning after the Questa troops went south after the Aztecs. The two troops and the rangers left around midnight, with the Questa militia taking over the sentry duty. Tom and Ed decided that one of their troops would have to go after, and try to stop the Questa troops.

Ed tried to talk to the Questa militia into moving out of the way. Tom, disgusted with the endless discussion and arguing, got his troop together and threatened to shoot the militia down if they did not move. Apparently, Tom had some very harsh words for Ed, shaming him in front of his troop.

In the face of Tom’s determination, the Questa militia let them through, thinking that their troops had a sufficient lead. Ed had gone to the bar and immediately started drinking and refusing to give Theodore Zwierzynski any help. Ted had only been troop commander for a few months, but he tried to get the Eleventh in line, but he failed.

Ed didn’t help with his drunken invitation to the troopers to have a party. To make matters worse, the Taos militia decided to follow Tom’s troop. They knew that the Aztecs had a

hundred soldiers in Albuquerque and were worried about the safety of their boys. The townsmen followed an hour after Tom left.

Ted abandoned his efforts to get the troop in order and he and the other officers went out on guard duty.

After hearing the story, Zach let loose a string of expletives. “What an unholy mess.” Just then, Ted, Richard Schell, Esteben Jiminez and Guido Villani rushed in, followed by Paul Diggs. Zach told Richard, Esteben and Guido to stay with the troopers and he led Ted to the hotel lobby, with Paul tagging along.

“This is one big screw up, Ted,” he began. “You committed the cardinal sin of any leader; you lost control of your men. There is only one thing you can do. Get back in there and get them under your control. You have a pistol, if you have to, use it.”

Ted looked aghast, “You mean shoot them?”

Zach just stared at him. Ted stood there, thinking. He rubbed the grip of his gun. Finally, he tightened his mouth and clenched his teeth and started for the restaurant door. “Remember, Ted,” said Zach, “they aren’t your friends and they aren’t your buddies. They are your men and you are their officer. Mean it and let them know you mean it.”

Paul touched Zach’s arm, “Let’s you and me walk past the restaurant window and let them know we aren’t listening at the door.”

They walked around the building and met a delegation of women. Zach assured them that everything was going to be all right. When they turned to go, Zach asked Cynthia about Ed’s condition. He asked her to say nothing about what happened until Zach had a chance to talk to him, in the morning.

When they were finished with the women, they turned to find that the troopers were formed up behind Ted on the street. Zach walked up to Ted and asked him to assign men to sentry duty and relieve the Fourth Rangers.

Ted nodded and said, "Uh, Zach, the men want to apologize."

Zach looked over the troopers and back to Ted. "I don't want an apology. They have shamed their unit and words won't fix that. Under the old military, they would be charged with mutiny and shot or imprisoned, but definitely stripped of their status and drummed out. And I would do it, too. But I think they are better than they have shown themselves to be today.

"It's is not up to me to disband a unit. I can only recommend and the Defense Council will have the final word. Right now, I would recommend disbanding and banishment, but I will be here for another week and I will reserve my judgment until I see how the situation shakes out."

With that he turned his back on the troopers and walked around the building to the hotel entrance. He grabbed a key for himself and tossed another to Paul, who said, "A little rough, weren't you?"

"Rough would have been to disband the unit and send it back to Carl. Then you would have seen rough.

"We have made a lot of mistakes here, from top to bottom. I want to talk to Grady O'Malley and Gandy Waters tomorrow. A lot of things are going to change or we are going to abandon this place and found a settlement somewhere else."

They went to bed, each thinking their own thoughts.

## Chapter 5

### Harsh Resolutions

*Spring 2048*

*What a mess. A mutiny, missing troopers, missing militia, drunken parties. What a mess.*

*They should all be court-martialed. I can't believe Ed let it get so out of hand. Just goes to show how thin the veneer of discipline is. I would never have believed that one of our troops would act like this.*

*Whatever happens, we have to straighten it out and fast. I am going to need to rattle some cages and hard.*

The next morning, Zach was up at five. He got dressed and toured the sentry posts. He found all sentries awake and alert. Pleased, he went in search of Ted, who should have been at the Town Hall. He found him in the office, writing.

"That better not be a letter of resignation," he said.

Ted guiltily shoved the paper into a drawer.

"Ted, there is enough blame to go around. You, Ed, Grady, Gandy Waters and the rest of that crowd at Questa, me, the Council, just about everybody. The thing to do now is act like adults, put this behind us and fix the problems. Quitting won't help."

Zach looked out the window and saw a crowd riding down the street. He looked around and saw the gun rack on the wall. He picked out a riot gun and a pistol, loaded them and stuffed shells into his jacket pocket. He turned in time to see Gandy and three other men entering the building.

He strode from the room and met them in the entry hall. “What do you want?” he said harshly.

“Zach,” said Gandy, surprised. “Where’s Grady? And what are you doing here?”

“Well, Gandy, I’m here to quell a mutiny and an armed insurrection. The mutiny is over for Eleven Troop. Now, I am telling you to hand over the insurgents.”

“Wait,” said one of the other men. “You can’t do this.”

Zach swung the riot gun to center on the chest of the speaker. “Were you one of those at the south end of town?”

The man’s face turned red, “You won’t shoot. Drop that popgun and I’ll show you.”

“Mr. Franklin,” Ted said from the doorway where he was carrying another riot gun.

“You don’t know Zach, so I’ll tell you that he will shoot. I’ve seen him. When he gets mad, he just doesn’t care.”

Franklin held out his hands as Zach thumbed off the safety. “Now, wait a minute. I didn’t mean nothing. Let’s just calm down.”

“Oh, I’m perfectly calm,” said Zach, not moving the shotgun. “I asked you before, are you one of the men at the south end of town?”

“Yeah, I was.”

“Then you are under arrest for armed insurrection. Ted, take him to a cell.”

Zach looked at the other two men and asked them the same question. One admitted that he had been there and Ted took him in charge, too.

At that moment they heard a voice from the street, “Zach, this is Paul. Are you all right in there? The boys and I have the street covered.”

“Just fine Paul. Bring any of those gentlemen that were involved in the incident at the south end of town in here. They are under arrest for insurrection.”

There were cries of protest from the riders in the street. They were cut off when a burst of automatic weapon fire sounded. They heard Paul say, “We will kill anyone who reaches for a weapon. I would recommend that any of you who were there yesterday morning, get down carefully and surrender quietly. Zach gets kind of sudden when he’s riled.”

Two other men sullenly entered the town hall and, when he returned, Ted took them to the cells.

“Look, Zach,” said Gandy, “can’t we talk about this. I think everything is getting out of hand. We need to take a step back and find a solution.”

“We have a solution, Gandy. Those men are going to hang or be banished. They are facing pretty serious charges.”

“Do you have the authority to even do this?” asked the remaining man.

“Let’s go down to the Communications Center and radio the governor.”

“Well, what if we don’t want to be a part of this any longer?” he asked.

“Then take your pack mule, a week’s supplies and a weapon and get out. Because Taos and Questa are part of Jefferson and you are under Jefferson law. You joined us and the land between here and Raton is Jefferson.

“You think you can reclaim it? I can bring twenty troops that say otherwise. Or, I can pull everyone who wants to go, take our supplies, equipment and all and leave you to the Aztecs, who will be drooling to get at you. Then, when they are done, we pick up the pieces.”



Gandy and his companion, a man named Darin Reidel, looked trapped. They were looking for the easy going Zach they had known. They were starting to realize that they had underestimated the Jeffersonians in general and Zach in particular.

“I’m sorry about what happened. We were wrong, I realize that now. But, can’t we just talk it over?”

“Yes, we can talk it over. First, I want every man who was involved in the incident yesterday morning to be back here in two hours. Then, you and I, Gandy, will sit down, with your town council and talk it over.

“You bring armed men in here and I will kill every damned one of you. Take it or leave it.”

Gandy and Darin whispered for a few seconds. “That’s hard, Zach. But, if I have your promise that no one gets hung or killed over yesterday, I’ll do what I can.”

“No promises, Gandy. No one will get hung without a trial. We have the name and descriptions of all the men, so don’t skip any and don’t let any get away.”

While he was waiting for Gandy and his people to return, Zach spoke to Paul, Ted and Ed Tingle, head of the Fourth Rangers about a possible defense in case the men from Questa attacked. Leaving the three to get organized, Zach went to see Ed.

Cynthia answered the door. She showed him into the room where Ed was sitting. Zach closed the door on her and spoke with Ed. What they said neither would tell, but by the time Gandy returned, Ed had showered, changed and shaved. He lost his hangdog look and walked with a firm step.

Gandy rode down the street with his hands out to show they were empty. A knot of six men were surrounded by ten others. When they reached the Town Hall, the six prisoners

dismounted and were herded to the cells by Ted and two troopers. One of the men had a bloody nose he kept wiping on his wrist. Zach told Ted to get a medic to look at the wound.

The rest of the men started to get down, but Zach stopped them. “No armed men, except mine, are allowed. If you are part of the delegation, put your weapons away. The rest of you, get out.”

“I thought this was a friendly meeting,” protested Gandy.

“I don’t feel real friendly, Gandy. This disaster almost ruined a good man and a well trained and disciplined troop. It almost started a civil war and a blood bath between your people and mine.

“No, I can’t say I feel the love, here. You want to talk, let’s talk. You want to sing Kumbaya, do it somewheres else. Make up your mind.”

The Questa council filed past Zach into the Council Chambers without another word. It consisted of Gandy Waters, Simon Estes, the Reverend Blackstone and a small, bald man named Dennis Roskop. Zach brought in Ed Soletto, Paul, Ted and Ed Tingle.

They sat at the council table. Zach waited and finally Gandy sighed and said, “As the mayor of Questa, I guess, no, I am responsible for what happened. I will take full responsibility and accept any punishment.”

“That’s not your call, Mr. Mayor,” said Zach. “What I want to know is what happened. What made the two troops mutiny? Who encouraged them to mutiny? And, lastly, where did they go and for what purpose?”

“Okay, fair enough. We have always felt that the Aztecs, as you call them, needed to be punished for the years that they terrorized us, hounded us and hunted us. We thought that that was what would happen, once you got here.

“All winter we talked about it. Your man, Ed, there refused to listen and it made a lot of people mad. We thought you were afraid of them. That’s why we didn’t meld the troops. That’s why we didn’t send the fifteen and sixteen year olds to Mitchell.

“We planned an expedition as soon as the roads were clear. Our rangers kept an eye on the roads and let us know when they were passable. So, two days ago, the city council Okayed the expedition against the Aztecs. We made sure that the militia was taking over the guard duty, so there was no danger when they left.”

“No danger? You sent half of our force on an expedition to fight someone we have a peace treaty with. And you knew about the treaty, because I told you,” Zach said. “You took it upon yourselves to order two troops of the Jefferson military and a ranger troop to abandon their posts and go skylarking off? And you say there was no danger?”

“There is danger on so many levels.” He began ticking them off on his fingers. “A civilian body absconding with the government forces. Collapse of military discipline. Circumventing the recognized military authority. Insurrection. Ignoring the rule of law. Endangering the community by reducing the defensive force below safe levels. Encouraging mutiny. Threatening legally constituted authority. Do you want me to go on?”

“Surely,” Reverend Blackstone asked, “you are not going to try those men in the jail, are you?”

“Those men don’t matter, Reverend. What matters is that we are trying to build a new society, based on law. Those men, abetted by you, shattered all of those efforts, in the Taos area. We are in danger of having the Aztecs interpret this as an attack on their empire. They have several thousands in their army. If they decided to attack, this settlement would be untenable.

“Even if we repulsed an attack, how many of your sons would die. That is the price of your revenge, gentlemen. I only hope that Tom Fahrner was able to stop them.”

“What about our loved ones languishing in Albuquerque? Are we supposed to just leave them?” asked Roskop.

“Mr. Roskop, since we signed the treaty with the Aztecs, we have managed to repatriate over three hundred slaves. This spring, a month from yesterday, we were scheduled to meet the Aztecs in Lubbock. The slaves in Albuquerque were our main concern. If we had failed to secure their release, either because the Aztec couldn't or wouldn't for some reason, a military campaign would have been carefully planned and executed to rescue them. We would have made it clear that such an action would be taken and that the Aztecs could not interpret it as an act of war, since they failed under the terms of our treaty to repatriate the captives..

“We would have made sure that the casualties were as light as possible. We would have allowed no looting. We would have allowed no destruction. In short, we would have got your people back and , hopefully, not started a war doing it.”

Zach turned to Ed Soletto. “Ed, what are your orders”

Ed cleared his throat and answered, “One, the troops will be reorganized, melding, to use your words, Gandy, them together. Two, any orders concerning the troops will be passed through the local Defense Committee made up of the troop leaders and troop advisors. My word will be final. Three, recruits coming of age will be sent to the Barracks at Mitchell for training. Fourth, any repeat of this will result in the troop being disbanded and the troopers banished for a term to be decided by the Jefferson Defense Council.”

Zach leaned back in his chair with his hands folded over his stomach. “Gandy, I don't want to hang anybody and I don't plan to. I just want to impress on you and yours that you are

now part of a larger community with laws and your actions will affect not only you, but people in settlements hundreds of miles away.

“Ted, release the prisoners and turn them over to the Questa council, with the understanding that they are on parole until the troops in the field have returned and we dispose of that case.”

They stood and shook hands, Ted leaving to release the prisoners.

A trooper rushed in and said there were riders approaching from the south. Ed told the trooper to sound the alarm. He asked Gandy to get the Questa militia ready to fight and that, if they saw a red flare, that Taos was being abandoned in favor of Questa. A green flare meant that the riders were the returning troops.

The Questa council and the prisoners raced to their mounts and pounded north. Zach told the women that were appearing on the street to gather what food, blankets and supplies they could and be prepared to flee north.

Jubilant shouts broke out at the southern defensive position. The riders turned out to be the missing troopers. Zach ordered Ed Tingle to hold off on firing the green flare until he had a chance to talk to Tom Fahrner. He mounted a horse and galloped south.

It was a somber group that rode up the road. There were several empty saddles, some with bodies lashed over them and several wagons carrying wounded. Tom had a bandage around his arm, but he rode stiffly upright in the saddle, as if he were on parade.

Zach took him aside and they spoke for several minutes. When they were done, Tom rode up to Ed Soleto and extended his hand and apologized for his actions and leaving without orders. Ed, relieved, took his hand.

Barbara Parker, the doctor, and Samantha Flynn, the nurse, took charge of the wounded, escorting the medics and their charges to the house that had been turned into a hospital. The rest of the troopers and militia were greeted by their families. The troopers were dismissed in front of the hotel.

Zach, Ed Soleto, Ted, Ed Tingle and Tom Fahrner went to the War Room to hear Tom's report. Ed Soleto ordered a trooper to bring refreshments for Tom.

He began his report with another apology to Ed Soleto. He told how he had collected his troop while Ed was trying to convince the militia to let them pass and how he had confronted the militia with an ultimatum that he would fire on them if they did not stand aside.

His command had ridden hard to catch the three errant troops, but they had not been able to overtake them. When they heard firing, they deployed and moved to defensive positions in order to support Twenty-Six and Twenty-Seven troops and the rangers. As they were digging in, the Taos militia arrived and he deployed them as a second line. His plan was to leapfrog, if necessary and try to discourage the Aztecs.

The Questa troops were in headlong flight with thirty or forty Aztec cavalry chasing them. They let the escaping troops through their lines and fired a volley over the heads of the Aztecs. This caused them to pause, but the bolting troops immediately reversed and charged the Aztecs, shouting for Tom to follow them.

A sharp fire-fight ensued. When they realized that Tom was not riding in support, they again panicked and bolted. They got back to the defensive line and were held by the militia. Tom had to threaten to shoot Ralph Serna, commander of Twenty-Six troop, when he urged his troop to charge, again.

Zach asked him how he got wounded and Tom said that he had had to rescue several of the troopers whose horses were shot out from under them. They had managed to reach some rocks, but were being attacked by the Aztecs. He had ordered another volley to be fired and had taken a small force to bring back the troopers.

The Aztecs had fired a couple of shots at the advancing troopers, but had decided to break off the attack.

At this point, two troopers burst into the room. Tom said that these were Ralph Serna and Michael Estes of the Questa troops. They stormed to the table and accused Tom of cowardice in not supporting them when they attacked the Aztecs after meeting the relief force.

“Sit down,” shouted Zach. The two troop commanders started to argue, but abruptly sat when Zach rose and drew his pistol. He asked them if they were the commanders of the Twenty-Six and Twenty-Seven Troops. They were confused, but admitted that they were.

Zach informed them that they were hereby relieved of command and that Ralph Serna was under arrest for abandoning his post and the two of them were charged with desertion.

“But, you can’t do that,” blurted Serna.

“Old son, I can have you taken outside, right this minute, and shot. And, now that I mention it, it sounds like a pretty good idea. One more word, unless I give you permission to speak, and I’ll do just that. Understand?”

The two stunned young men nodded and looked at each other. Zach, still staring at the prisoners, asked Ed Tingle to fire off the green flare and wait for the Questa council and escort them to this room when they arrived.

Zach then proceeded to enumerate the full charges against the two troopers and they turned pale and began to shift nervously in their chairs. By the time he finished tolling the

charges and stressing that each one was punishable by the death penalty, they were on the verge of panic.

He had just finished when Gandy Waters and the Reverend Blackstone arrived. Estes said, "He's going to execute us, Mr. Waters. Don't let him."

"Estes," said Zach. "He has no say in this. You look at me, if you want to say anything. You don't have any say, do you Mr. Waters?"

Gandy shook his head and Michael and Ralph slumped down in their chairs, defeated. Tom was asked to repeat his report and the prisoners hung their heads when he told of how they had run from a numerically inferior force twice.

When he was finished, Ed Soleto asked Ted to take the prisoners to a cell. When they left, Gandy asked if they were going to be tried. Zach shook his head and informed them that they would spend the night in jail, 'to contemplate their sins', but he would commute their sentences to a reduction in rank and some onerous job that Ed Soleto and Tom Fahrner would pick.

The final casualty count was eight dead and thirteen wounded. They had brought back three slaves they rescued from the first field they encountered. The guard had bolted and they had brought back a couple of men and a woman. They were turned over to the doctor for a check up and would be returned to their homes, if they wished, or they were invited to remain at Questa or Taos.

They were declared fit and all three accepted a home in Taos.

A memorial service was held the next morning and Zach would bring the names of the dead back to Mitchell to be carved on the memorial stone. After the service he met Gandy and



asked him, “How many widows and orphans?” Gandy looked at the families of the slain and turned away.

Ed Soletto and Tom Fahrner saw to the reorganization of the troops. Ralph Serna and Michael Estes were made Lieutenants and the troops were thoroughly reshuffled. Ed and Tom became the advisors to Twenty-Six and Twenty-Seven Troops. They recruited men to fill that role with the other two troops and the two ranger troops. They formulated a training plan and requested that Matt Busby, Karl Wetherby and John Otis visit for training after the troops had learned the basics.

Zach took Grady O’Malley aside and spoke with him at length. He insisted that, if there were two councils, at least, the two towns’ representatives should meet once a month and discuss any problems and concerns. They took several families aside and asked them to relocate to Questa to keep an eye on things.

Zach stayed until the major problems were ironed out. He radioed in his report and was told to return to Mitchell when he felt it was advisable. Zach, Paul and the Fourth Rangers left with the two recruits from Questa and arrived in time for the wedding between Kay, Mary and Ed.

Their house had been built and the wedding and reception went off without a hitch. Zach took their vows and declared them man and wives. The shivaree was nipped in the bud by Sarah, who had become a mother hen to the newlyweds. She remembered how embarrassing hers had been.

The Council asked Zach to meet with the Aztecs to smooth out the attack from Questa and to demand the return of the slaves in Albuquerque.

Before he left, he lavished attention on Sarah to the point she insisted that she would be more than happy if he left for a year. They took long walks and picnicked in the hills with their family. Sarah seemed to have a premonition that something tragic was going to happen to him. She made love with an abandon that she had not shown since their honeymoon days and Zach could not seem to convince her that nothing was going to happen.

Because of the uncertainty of the reception they would receive when they met the Aztecs, both Seventh and Ninth Rangers were put in the field. They reported that the Aztec contingent consisted of forty troops and the delegation. There were no other Aztecs in the area. It was Harry's opinion that the meeting was on the up-and-up.

Still, the War Council decided to send Zach and Robert Agnello with One Troop. They would meet Nineteen Troop at Gunnison and Seventeen Troop from Palo Duro. They would also take two of the pickups.

Sarah clung to Zach when he said good-bye the night before they were to leave Mitchell. He and Karl were ready to leave the ranch and spend the night in Mitchell, but Sarah was so upset that Zach decided to stay the night and leave early in the morning. He told Karl to have the troops leave on schedule and that he would meet them on the road, if he was late.

He and Sarah spent the night talking and she finally drifted off to sleep shortly after three in the morning. He slipped from the bed and kissed her. She murmured in her sleep. He led his horses to the top of the rise before mounting and riding into town. He snatched a couple of hours sleep before the expedition set out. He knew that the morning would see a repeat of the night before, if he had stayed. Karl assured him that Harriett and Anne would take care of her. "Anyway," he said. "Harriett gave me strict orders to sit on you if there was any shooting trouble

## Chapter 6

### Rescue Plan

Summer 2048

*Sarah's mood is really bothering me. I know that she worries about me whenever I leave on one of these little expeditions, but this time it was different. It was as if she really knew something. I hope that her premonition was only nerves.*

*The trouble in Taos could have degenerated into a civil war easily enough. I hope I scared some sense into the Questans. And I hope we can talk sense into the Aztecs. Those captives were part of the deal when we signed the treaty and I hope they will honor it.*

*Ed Soleto worries me, too. He really fell apart at a critical time. It may have been a mistake leaving him in charge of the troops, but Carl thinks it was just an aberration. I told Tom to keep an eye on him and, if something like that happens again, to relieve him. I agree with Carl that he be given another chance, but I don't want to see another eight dead troopers if he blows it.*

*The one great thing was the wedding. Ed Young looked so lost. The girls looked radiant, happy and excited. I still don't know how they do it, two wives. I have a lot of questions that are too delicate to ask, but they still persist. I can't see Sarah sharing the house with another woman, much less the bedroom. The decisions the man would have to make and, if he was wrong, he would have two wives mad at him. Gives me the shivers. And, yet, there have been no divorces or gossip about troubles out of the ordinary, so there must be some way to make it work.*

The trip to Lubbock was uneventful, Nineteen Troop was waiting at the crossroads and Seventeen Troop, with Ishtar Singh, met them on the road to Lubbock. Zach wasn't surprised that Ishtar Singh was riding with the Palo Duro troop.

"Chandra Singh was good enough to let me take his troop out," Ishtar bellowed, his white teeth gleaming through his jet beard. "Maybe, we will get some action this trip, hey, Zach?"

Karl grinned and said, "Zach got a little too much action last time, Ishtar."

"Oh, that is correct. How is the leg? You disappointed me very much. You had a party and didn't invite me." He slapped Zach on the back, almost dislodging him from his saddle and bellowed laughter, again.

The scouts continued to report that the Aztecs were not trying to ambush them and they set up camp at their usual site. Zach was surprised when General Morales sent word that he wanted to speak with Zach before the formal meeting began in the morning.

Zach met Morales at the meeting site, ostensibly to view the preparations. After an exchange of pleasantries, General Morales led Zach away from the group and lit a thin, black cigar.

When he had the cheroot lit, he blew a plume of smoke at the moon and turned to Zach. "We have a serious problem, Senor Banducci. There was a mess covered with a rock and you have kicked the rock over.

"The emperor has a nephew. A peculiar young man who has much influence in the capitol through his family. To handle the young man, without drastic measures, the emperor created a kingdom at Albuquerque and made the young man a king. Strong 'advisors' were placed around the king. Very diplomatic and able. The king does nothing but hunts and presides over many state dinners and enjoys his harem. All important and onerous duties are performed

by the 'advisors'. We have used this kingdom as a dumping ground for the misfits and shirkers in our army and government. They have become the overseers on the eight government farms. There are, in addition, fifty cavalry and fifty infantry to meet any threat from the natives and outlaws in the area. These soldiers are under the command of General Carlos Hernandez and are a very well-trained and competent and loyal unit.

Zach interrupted the general. "Your pardon, general," he said. "Does his harem consist of those captives who are the subject of one of the clauses of the treaty? And this hunting, does it also concern the captives? We rescued several captives who were very enlightening."

The general waved his cigar. "That is the crux of the matter, my friend. Mad King Alfonso's peculiarities run to the cruel, at times. There was an incident where several daughters of another powerful faction were, shall we say, treated inappropriately. The emperor covered it up with gifts of land and positions and removed his nephew to the Kingdom of Albuquerque.

"The incursion by your troops was met by a declaration of war. Alfonso demands an army to deal with you. The emperor is reluctant to commit more forces to the outskirts of the empire. His position is tenuous after the loss of the war with Bolivia and the stalemate in California. The move at San Antonio was the first small step in rebuilding his reputation and a war against you and your allies would be a disaster.

"However, he can not let his nephew continue to howl and send demands to the court, through his family. This family would like nothing better than to remove the emperor and place one of their own on the throne. Another reason to keep the troops near the capitol.

"Now we come to our dilemma. You are here to demand the repatriation of the slaves that King Alfonso owns. This would be seen as a sign of weakness and used to precipitate a coup. An attack on Albuquerque, by you, would necessitate a war, which would precipitate a

coup. Doing nothing to support King Alfonso would look like a left-handed attack on him and would...”

“Precipitate a coup,” finished Zach. “A case of damned if you do and damned if you don’t. I hope you are not asking us to abandon the slaves?”

“I wish that you would, however, that would undoubtedly result in turmoil on your side,” he answered and sighed at Zach’s nod.

“How do we solve this? Truth be told, a war with us would be the only down side to your scenarios. I like you and all, general, but your internal politics are of no interest to us, except for the slaves.”

“That is what you don’t understand. Either of the other two factions would spend the blood and lives of the Aztecs to restore the southwest to Aztec control. In a fit of madness, they would gut the empire to attack like mad dogs.

“Whoever won would see death and, possibly, the destruction of their peoples. I am sure that it would start a civil war at home and you have a number of enemies that would like nothing better than to see your forces decimated.”

Zach took out his old pipe. He carried it everywhere and dry-smoked it when thinking. The general signaled to an aide who was sent to fetch tobacco. When the aide returned, Zach absently took the pouch from his counterpart and packed the bowl. He had it lit before he really realized what he was doing. Zach stared at the lit pipe as if wondering how it got there, shrugged and continued smoking while he contemplated.

He finally knocked the dottle out and turned to the general. “As I see it, you can’t release the captives and we can’t rescue them. What if they escape?”

“Escape?” questioned Morales.

“Escape. You say you have a man on the inside, near Alfonso. Could he send the troops on maneuvers, throw a party for them, something to get them out of the way?”

“He is in that position, yes. But how are you going to organize a mass escape? You would have to have people spread throughout the camps, weapons, supplies, a million other things.”

“It all depends on how far up the command ladder your man is. An inspection team, with properly forged documents could be sent up from the capitol to investigate the security of Albuquerque.

“We could have a list of names from the Taos settlers who would spread the word. On the night the soldiers are distracted, they would overpower the guards, keeping the killing to a minimum, you yourself said that the dregs of the empire are sent there, and meet guides to bring them to Taos.”

“But,” the general interposed, “Alfonso will pursue. It may be the next day or the next week, but he surely will pursue. The army may delay, but they will have to obey orders. They will find out that you have absconded with the slaves and it will be like you attacked and freed them.”

Zach cleared his pipe and subconsciously began loading it again. He paced, smoking. After a few minutes, when it sounded like he was arguing with himself, he turned to General Morales, again. “Simple. We hang them.”

“You what? First you will save them and then, to prevent a war, you will hang them. I must admit, senor, that your plan is brilliant,” Morales said sarcastically.

“Yes, I think so,” Zach replied. “There are forests along the road to Taos. We will rig it to look like there are ‘gallows fruit’ hanging from them. Of course, Alfonso will demand that

someone verifies that we have not put up dummies. Your man will be the only one allowed to approach. Alfonso's army is in territory forbidden by treaty. If he is with them, and he insists on attacking, we will make sure that he is one of the casualties and, if your man can take over for the glorious dead, then he can lead the soldiers back, taking the hero home on his shield."

"Gallows fruit? Glorious dead? The Aztecs do not carry shields."

Zach explained the metaphors and references and, in the end, General Morales agreed that it had a chance of working. His only doubt was laying Albuquerque open to invasion.

Zach assured him that Jefferson had no designs on the settlement and gave his word of honor that they would follow the plan to the letter. "Anyway, the military of Albuquerque will be untouched. If we wanted a war with the Aztecs, why go through this charade. We couldn't hold the place against Alfonso's men, much less a concerted effort by the Aztec army without stripping our forces from the whole state."

"It has possibilities. Let me think on it," mused General Morales.

The two men walked back to the tent and went their separate ways. Zach called a meeting of the troop advisors, Robert Agnello and Karl Wetherby and explained the situation and outlined his plan. They discussed it from every angle they could think of and only came up with one weak point: the fake inspection party. They would have to be fluent in Spanish and able to carry through, acting like Aztec bureaucrats. They had plenty of Spanish speakers and more than enough Hispanics to form the party, but one slip and they would be executed as spies.

Zach said it was this or a war with the Aztecs. He told them he was sure that they could hold their own, but the Texans, the Cherokee and, maybe, the Kansans were vulnerable. Palo Duro and Trinidad would have to be abandoned and all the work in those two settlements would be lost.



The meeting broke up at midnight with the agreement that nothing would be said outside of their small group and they would wait to see what General Morales said about the plan. Several were for it and several against. While they did not want a general war with the Aztecs, they felt the danger to the men sent in would be too great.

The next morning, the two sides met. The Aztecs presented an official protest in regards to the attack on Albuquerque and demanded the return of the three kidnapped citizens. Robert presented his own official protest at the continued captivity of persons covered under the treaty and demanded immediate repatriation of the captives in Albuquerque. Several hours of fruitless discussion ensued between Senor Cristobal and General Morales on one side and Zach and Robert Agnello on the other. Minister Montoya sat back in his chair and looked bored. Both sides agreed to take the protests and confer with their governments. Another meeting was scheduled to be held in six weeks.

When the meeting broke up, General Morales invited Zach to his tent for a drink. They walked to the general's spacious quarters and shut the tent flaps. The general brought out a bottle and they sat at a small table that was moved to the center of the tent to prevent eavesdroppers. They held a low-toned conversation.

The general agreed to the plan that Zach had proposed. Morales identified General Hernandez as the highly placed person in Alfonso's capitol. General Morales proposed that he, Morales, travel to Albuquerque, ostensibly to inspect the defenses against another attack and confer with Alfonso. He would present the plan to Hernandez and work out details. The two of them would go hunting, in the direction of Santa Fe. They would meet with Zach at the place where the battle had been fought in two weeks.

Zach returned to his camp and related the conversation to Robert, Karl and the advisors. Robert agreed to take the delegation back to Mitchell and report on the meeting with the Aztecs and relay the plan to Carl and the Defense Committee. Zach would take Ishtar Singh's Seventeen and Harry's Ninth Ranger troops and ride for Taos.

Should the Defense Committee approve, they would send a message to Zach that Sarah had a boy; otherwise, they would report a girl. Zach, meanwhile, would get the list of names and meet with the Aztecs.

They broke camp the next day and rode to Palo Duro. There they separated and Zach went west, while Robert headed north. Karl threatened to go AWOL if he was not allowed to join Zach. Ishtar Singh thought it would be a fine thing if the Aztecs attacked. Harry began talking to his men about the mission and, when he asked for volunteers, they raised their hands to a man.

At Taos, Zach explained the plan to Gandy Waters and Grady O'Malley after he had brought Ed Soletto up to speed. These were the only men informed and they were sworn to silence on the matter.

Word got out, however, and several of the Taos troopers demanded they be included. Ralph Serna was the most vocal. He stormed into Zach's office and demanded, "You have to let me go. My cousins are there."

Zach was in a meeting with the troop advisors at the time and he exploded at the interruption. "Listen, trooper. The reason we are in this mess is because you couldn't control yourself and went off half-cocked." He swung around the desk and began jabbing Serna with his thumb. "This is the reason that you, personally, would never be allowed in on this. You have no self control, you refuse to go through channels and you make demands on your superiors.

“I see you haven’t learned anything in the past few months. You are still the self-centered, demanding, undisciplined trooper that I left. Ed convinced me that you had leadership qualities and, against my better judgment, I let him make a lieutenant out of you. I can see that was a mistake, as of now, you are a ranker.” With that, Zach snatched the gold band off Serna’s jacket.

He called to an aide and told him to escort Ralph to a cell and hold him there, in solitary, until he, Zach, came to see him. After the shocked trooper was taken away, Zach took a deep breath and resumed the meeting. He received a list of twenty-five names of captives.

Harry reported that he had been working with the three rescued slaves on the protocol for the camps. His scouts were to make up the inspection party, with the exception of Don Lambert, whose carrot top would cause some suspicion. The Aztecs had created a caste system, where the more one looked like an Indio, the higher they could rise in society and the military. Someone of Don’s pale complexion and red hair would never be allowed in a ministerial level troop.

On the day of the meeting, Zach sent Ninth Rangers to reconnoiter the meeting site. Ishtar Singh insisted on providing the escort. Ninth Ranger leader, Juan Ojeda sent back a trooper to report that only three men were waiting and there were no other troops around.

Zach, Karl and Harry rode down and introductions were exchanged. The third man in the Aztec party was Capitan Raul Smith, General Hernandez’ aide-de-camp. He would be assigned to escort the inspection party, when it arrived. General Hernandez was cool to the idea, but agreed to carry out his orders. He provided papers legitimizing the inspectors and the required passes from the capitol.

General Morales told Zach that a bundle would be left at the hunting camp. It would contain uniforms for the common soldiers and officers. The weapons used by the special

military units were a version of the M-25, which Zach could supply. The troops would be sent on maneuvers one week after the inspection party left. They would be sent south of Albuquerque and return two days later. Zach said that, if the inspection party had not arrived in a week's time, there was something wrong on their end and he would explain to General Morales at next month's meeting at Lubbock.

The six men shook hands and parted. Harry would stay in the area until the hunting party left and bring the uniforms back to Taos. The rest of the party rode north to make final plans and wait for the go-ahead signal from Mitchell.

That evening, Zach found out that he had a new son. When Harry brought in the bundle, his men tried on the uniforms. The common soldiers were dressed in white trousers, bottle green coats and polished cavalry boots. Their headgear was a stiff green leather shako with a black horsetail plume. White leather belts were worn around the waist and crossed over the shoulders. One of the shoulder belts held a cartridge box of black leather and the other held a canteen. The sergeant and corporal had single or double white hashes on their left sleeves.

The officers wore white trousers with a red, white and green stripe running down the outside seam. Their green coats were draped with gold braid and buttons. They carried a curved cavalry saber and a pistol on a belt, covering a red sash. Their shakoes sported a white horsetail.

The three captives studied them critically and made a few suggestions. They insisted that the officers were not arrogant enough and the soldiers looked too happy. General Hernandez insisted that the senior officer of the inspection party be no more than a major, since Alfonso refused to meet with anyone below the rank of General. The other uniform belonged to a captain. Donald Mediano would play the major and Juan Ojeda would play the captain.

The uniformed troops pranced around the room, until Ed ordered them to stop. He lectured them on the seriousness of the situation and that he expected them to act like men, not boys dressing up for Halloween. They looked at Harry and Karl, but they just nodded towards Ed.

The next morning, just after the moon had set, the troop, dressed in their regular clothes, moved out. They would change into the uniforms when they had reached a point south of Albuquerque. They were screened by Twelfth Rangers, who would shadow them into Albuquerque and give support, if there was trouble. Zach, Karl and Ishtar Singh would lead Seventeen Troop to the meeting point near Santa Fe. They would provide cover for the escapees, if the pursuit developed before it was expected or something went wrong.

Troops Twenty-five and Twenty-six would be ready on the road to Taos where the final scene of the escape was scheduled to take place. They would hang harnesses from trees. These harnesses would support the 'hung' escapees to make it look like they were hanging by their necks.

A nerve wracking four days passed before the rangers reported that the troop had left Albuquerque. They joined Zach at Santa Fe. Juan wanted to burn the uniforms, but Zach forbade it, saying that they might have use for them later. He ordered the Ninth Rangers to get some sleep and start out for Taos. He did not want them recognized.

However, they were too keyed up and, because they were disturbing the sleep of the rest of the troopers, he ordered them to leave immediately. His last instructions to Harry were to take the Taos troops back with him and use any means necessary to prevent them from leaving Taos. He did not want a war on his hands because of some hot-headed troopers bent on revenge.

## Chapter 7

### Rescued to Death

*Summer 2048*

*The next two weeks will be really nerve wracking. At least the troopers got out safely. Now, if Hernandez holds up his end of the bargain. Meanwhile, Santa Fe has only been sporadically looted. With the time on our hands and the troopers available, we plan on dividing the town up and doing it right. It amazes me that the town hasn't been burned or thoroughly looted.*

*We also have people putting together the harnesses we will use to 'hang' the escaped slaves. I saw a demonstration and it really looks authentic, from a distance. Going over the scenario, it sounds fantastic to me and I am not sure how much it will be believed by the Aztecs. Oh, well, sleight of hand has been going on and being believed for centuries.*

With a week to wait, he ordered parties of troopers to conduct inspections of the town. Each group was given a map of Santa Fe, stacks of which were at the Tourist Office. Each day they were assigned a section and ordered to listen for the whistle sounding recall. When they heard the whistle, they were to drop everything and assemble at the town square.

Any supplies were to be stacked in specifically marked points to be gathered later, when the Aztecs had left the area. They were to mark where operating vehicles or wagons were located.

This kept the troopers from being bored and stockpiled supplies that the escapees might need. If there was enough time, they would try to load conveyances with the salvaged goods before heading for the 'hanging ground', as Karl put it.

Zach cautioned Ishtar Singh and Nand Singh, the troop leader, about pilfering community loot, such as clothing, weapons, blankets and food. Anyone not turning in these materials or hoarding them would face company punishment. Any luxury goods and personal items were fair game. The troopers knew that they had better err on the side of caution. Ishtar Singh's company punishment was harsh and swift.

On the seventh day, no parties were allowed out. They rested and traded loot, waiting for the escapees. Around three in the morning, a ranger arrived announcing that the first of the refugees was only a mile behind them. There were sixteen stockpiles, each the responsibility of one trooper. That trooper was to escort a group of refugees to the cache, load vehicles, if there was time and start them out of town towards Taos.

The first group straggled in. Some of them rode horses stolen from the farms; others carried children or supported the elderly. Zach waited until they had thirty or so and sent them off with the first trooper.

As more came in, they were sectioned into groups and sent to a cache and led out of town. One group brought electrifying news. Three women from Alfonso's harem had strangled the drunken king in his bed before escaping. The guards on the bedroom door were largely ceremonial and were usually asleep. The guards at the harem doors were enticed into the room and dealt with. The guards at the gate had been given drugged wine.

Towards dawn, the stream of refugees slowed to a trickle and, finally, the rear guard joined them. Among them were thirty or so men with weapons taken from the overseers. James Fong was the last man in. He reported that there had been a tentative effort to organize pursuit, but they had fired a few shots over their heads and discouraged them.

Zach ordered the armed escapees disarmed and put them to work loading wagons. The men protested, but Zach threatened to shoot anyone who disobeyed. Ishtar Singh backed up that threat with the remnants of his troop and the rangers.

At nine, the last of the wagons had started up the road and Zach and Karl formed the troopers up for a rear guard and they followed the last of the wagons north. They reached the 'hanging ground' and found the rest of the troopers from Seventeen Troop organizing the escapees and showing them how to get into the harness. The wagons were sent on to Taos and the road cleared.

Twelfth Rangers were sent south to watch for the Aztec pursuit and, if it was not General Hernandez, to hold them up in a narrow section of road. James was to report when they saw the first pursuers, regardless of who they were.

The next evening, Fong sent a runner back and Zach ordered the refugees to take their places. Since the children could not be trusted to remain silent, they had been sent on ahead and their places were taken by bundles which would be mistaken for children at a distance. Zach felt confident that observers would be fooled unless they were allowed too close a view.

He rode to the choke point and searched the approaching horsemen with his glasses. He saw the bulky figure of General Hernandez in his camouflage field uniform riding at the head of his troops. Zach ordered the rangers to pull back to the 'hanging ground'.

They met the Aztec column two hundred yards down the road. From where General Hernandez halted his troops, they had a clear view of the trees and their burdens. Zach, with three men and carrying a white flag, rode down the road to meet them.

He introduced himself and Ishtar Singh. "You realize, General, that you have entered the neutral zone between our lands with an armed force, which is forbidden by the Treaty of



Lubbock. I realize that you are chasing runaways and we were prepared to contest your claim to them. However, when they revealed that they were responsible for the death of King Alfonso, we were determined to return them.

“We could understand killing while trying to escape slavery, but deliberate murder of a monarch cannot be tolerated. Knowing your not too subtle methods of punishment, we gave them a choice: returning with you or suicide. They chose suicide.” Zach turned in his saddle and waved his hand towards the trees.

“Senor,” answered General Hernandez, “not that I doubt you, but I am sure that you will allow us to inspect these suicides?”

Zach bowed in the saddle in acquiescence.

He turned and spoke rapid Spanish to Capitan Smith. One of the accompanying troopers, David Lambert, whispered to Zach that Hernandez had ordered Smith to take a troop.

Zach nodded and turned to the general, “General, you don’t need a troop when the eyes of one of your own men should be enough. I think that a troop of your men would make my men nervous.”

The general stared at Zach for a moment, as if contemplating whether to agree or attack and, eventually, nodded and spoke to Capitan Smith, again. David nodded and Ishtar Singh and Toma Singh escorted the Aztec through the ‘dead’.

While they were gone, Zach explained that the men had killed the women and children and then hung themselves. Several had been shot trying to escape, but most realized that suicide was the lesser of two evils.

The general offered a cigar and the two men smoked in silence until Capitan Smith returned. He reported to the General and fell back into line. Hernandez dropped the remains of

his cigar in the road and saluted Zach. "I must return to Albuquerque and prepare my report for the capitol. I will tell them of your actions, though I, personally, think that executing only the murderers would have been sufficient. You may call us barbaric, but this, well," he waved towards the trees and shook his head.

James Fong followed with his rangers until the Aztec column had left the mountain. He sent a runner back to report when they were clear. Meanwhile, Zach had ordered fuel piled and lit. They used green and rotten wood to create a large amount of smoke. If the Aztecs sent in scouts, they would find the remains of a fire and nothing else.

When the news arrived that the Aztecs had left, Zach ordered the escapees to form up and head towards Taos. The wagons had been hidden by a bend in the road and they were used to transport the elderly, women, children and some who were sick or injured.

As they were getting ready to start out, a group of men drifted out of the trees and moved across the small meadow towards them. Immediately, the troopers dropped into the ditch at the side of the road and covered them. The man in the lead raised his right hand to show it was empty and continued to advance.

The men stopped a few yards from the road and the leader called out, "I am John Little Bear, of the Navajo. I would like to speak with your leader."

Zach rose and handed his rifle to Karl. He climbed out of the ditch and walked up the Navajo. Zach towered over the much shorter man, but Little Bear had an air about him that made him seem much larger. Zach introduced himself and waited.

"We saw what happened at Albuquerque. We have a man watching them. He saw them run towards Taos. He came back and we came. Many of the people you have are of the People. Others are Hopi or Zuni or Apache or Pima. Are you going to keep the slaves?"

“First of all, Mr. Little Bear, I think that you are stalling us until your people get here. If you have someone watching the Aztecs, you have someone watching us and you know that we don’t keep or use slaves.

“If these are your people and they want to go with you, then they are free to do so. Anyone who wants to go somewhere else is free to do so. Those that want to go with us are free to do so. Go ahead, talk to them and take your own out of here. You can have enough supplies and transportation to get them home safely.

“You told some of my men to stay out of your lands. That’s fine. If you want to be standoffish, the same goes for us. However, if you want to trade or work together, then that’s fine too. Your choice.”

The Navajo smiled and stuck out his hand. “Thank you for your offer,” was all he said. He spoke to the men behind him and they immediately went to the wagons and called out in several native dialects. People began to stream across the road and form behind Little Bear. When movement stopped, there were almost three hundred people gathered. Zach ordered the division of supplies and wagons.

When they were done, John Little Bear approached Zach and said, “You were very wise to return our people.”

“Wisdom had nothing to do with it,” replied Zach, exasperated. “We don’t hold slaves. We don’t have time to guard people that don’t want to be with us. They would have been escorted to wherever they wanted to go after the doctors in Taos had looked them over and treated any that needed it. It wasn’t wisdom that got your people back to you, it was common sense. Just take them and go.”

Karl led Zach's horse to him. "What an ungrateful s.o.b. The least he could have done was thank you."

"Let's don't worry about it," returned Zach. "These people have had a long day, let's get them home."

They loaded up the remnants of the escapees and drove towards Taos. The Navajo led his band south to the crossing of a westward road. Zach sent a man back to warn the rangers that they were coming and to call them back.

Karl suggested that they send some of the wagons back to Santa Fe and pick up the rest of the supplies and loot, but Zach vetoed the idea for the time being. He wanted to get the refugees to Taos for a hot meal and medical care and his own men home for some rest.

"What are you going to do with Serna?" asked Karl. "He has been in jail for more than a week, now."

"Since this operation is over and he can't make a hash out of it, I'll let him go."

Karl looked over the escapees. "There are about a hundred of them. A lot are young men. We should be able to create another troop or two. Are we going to take Eleven Troop back to Mitchell?"

"I wouldn't think so," Zach answered. "The troop is pretty well integrated and it would just create more of a mess to pull them apart."

"I know that Palo Duro can use some replacements, Gunnison lost a few last Fall, Trinidad, Rio Grande and Taos need replacements to bring each troop up to twenty and rangers up to fourteen. I think we will find that there aren't that many replacements."

Ishtar Singh was complaining about the lack of action when they reached Taos. “It is getting to be very boring, Zach. When first we met there was action all the time, now it is riding and talking. I am getting too old for this.”

The towns’ people met the incoming caravan. The people from Questa and Taos mixed, everyone cheering the success of the mission. Tearful reunions took place on every side and it was with difficulty that the doctors were able to move the escapees to the makeshift hospital set up in the high school gym.

Zach, Karl and Ishtar Sing and the troop advisors left the mayors to get things organized. They met at the Command Center and called in the Ninth Rangers. The room was crowded when the rangers entered, but the Defense Council, including the visitors, wanted to hear the complete story of the inspection party.

Juan started off by saying that Donald Mediano made the most arrogant Major he had ever seen. “He kept slapping his riding crop against his boot and the poor clerk almost wet himself. He kept demanding to see King Alfonso and waving his papers under the poor man’s nose. Capitan Smith finally arrived and led us off. He found an empty house and had furniture brought in and we left the men and went to see General Hernandez.

“The next day we started making the rounds of the farms. It was pretty much the same, Don demanded that all of the guards be mustered and our men took their places. As soon as he had the overseers together, he began a detailed inspection, bawling out any of them who had a dirty rifle, sloppy uniform, poor posture, anything.”

“I had given one hour for Adam Relgado to find someone with a name on the list, explain to him or her, privately, our plan and to get them back to their quarters,” Don interrupted.

“Well, it worked. We went to every one of the plantations and contacted somebody. They promised to pass on the plan to those they trusted and try to inform the slaves in the city.” Juan continued.

Adam broke in, “That was the easy part. There was a lot of contact between the town and farm slaves on market day. They spread the word to the town slaves and they dispersed it to the rest.”

“Capitan Smith was a great help,” Juan said. “Whenever we started getting any flack, he stepped in and threw his weight around. Don kept asking to meet the King, when we were in public, but Smith kept putting us off.

“We finally inspected every one of the big farms and a couple of the larger private ones. Our last night there, Hernandez threw Don and I a party with his officers and we managed to meet another of the names on the list and make sure the word was spread in the palace.”

Don laughed and said, “And how did you manage to get the time alone with that one?”

Juan blushed and said, “Never mind. I managed.”

Karl insisted on hearing the story. Don told of how Juan took the girl into one of the bedrooms in Hernandez’ home. The General had given her to Juan for the night as a gift. “Of course, he knew that she was one of the names on the list and this was the only way Juan could speak with her for any length of time without arousing suspicion.”

Rex Moncayo asked Juan how his wife, Lisa, would take the news that Juan was bringing home another wife. Juan made a move as if to punch the trooper amidst general laughter.

With that, the rangers were dismissed. Zach ordered Ralph Serna to be brought. When he arrived, much the worse for wear, the council left him standing at attention for a few minutes.

Ed finally spoke, “Ralph, we will give you a choice. You can leave the service with no prejudice and no problems or you can stay with a troop in the ranks.”

Ralph kept his eyes on the wall over the Council’s head. “Sir, I have given it a lot of thought. I talked with Mr. Hutt a couple of times and my folks, too. Well, I want to say I’m sorry. I know that I did wrong, that I wasn’t thinking of anybody but me.

“I’d like to stay with the troops, if you’ll let me, and I’ll try hard to be part of the team. Just don’t kick me out, please.”

“We brought a couple of your cousins in, Serna. You’re free to go. We will let you know what we decide tomorrow. Dismissed.”

“Thanks,” he said and ran from the room.

Zach asked Ishtar Singh to take his troop and some wagons the next morning to Santa Fe to pick up the gathered supplies, if they were still there. The Council adjourned and Zach and the other members of the expedition went to find a meal, a bath and a bed.

The next morning Zach woke late and blamed it on old age. He stretched, listening to his back pop and his joints crackle. He showered, shaved and dressed. He stuffed his dirty clothes in an old laundry sack and went downstairs to eat. Before he had gone to bed, he had turned on his personal laptop and looked at the troop roster and made a few notes.

He ordered and saw Ed and Tom walk in. He gestured for them to join him and they shared small talk and drank coffee until their orders arrived. Zach asked Ed if he had a count of the escapees, yet. Ed produced a list from his breast pocket and smoothed it out on the table.

“We have a total of one hundred and twelve people; twelve kids, two of which are orphans; forty-four men between fifteen and thirty; thirty-six men older than thirty; nineteen

women over sixteen, eight of which are pregnant. They escaped from the brothels or the harem and a couple from the farms.” He gave him the breakdown of those with ties to Questa.

“Zach, it looks like we didn’t get all of the slaves. Each farm had a couple of women in a separate building for the overseers. I don’t know if they were locked in or, well, busy or what, but they didn’t get out. I would estimate that there were sixteen to twenty of them. Most were young. They don’t last long.”

Zach sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I guess we will send a note to Morales. I don’t know what else to do. Man. We got four hundred out.” He slammed his fist on the table.

The others let him calm down before Tom said, “Gandy came to me first thing this morning. He wants to set up a training program for the new boys here in Taos. He feels that all forty-four should be assigned to Taos.”

“Bull,” spat Zach, having a target for his anger and frustration. “He keeps the ones that have family here and that’s all. Where is he, I’ll tell him myself.”

Zach got up and marched from the restaurant, followed by Ed and Tom who exchanged glances. They knew that Zach was likely to do anything in his present mood.

On the sidewalk, Zach looked around as if expecting to see Gandy waiting. He was distracted by Karl who walked up and slapped him on the shoulder. The ex-mercenary grinned and asked him how he slept. Zach snarled that he had slept just fine and Karl was taken aback. He looked at Ed and Tom and they shrugged and looked at the sky.

Grady O’Malley approached and asked if they would meet with the escapees. They were still at the makeshift clinic and he thought that it would be a good idea for someone to talk to them. Zach agreed and the group followed him to the school.



Once there, they found Gandy Waters and the Questa Council speaking with groups of refugees. Barbara Parker approached and reported that all of the refugees were ready to be released. There were no medical problems, but she suggested that Edna March come down and speak with some of them who seemed to be withdrawn or uncertain. Zach agreed and asked Grady to contact Mitchell and arrange it.

He then took the Questa Council aside and asked them to join him and the Taos Council on the stage. When they were assembled, Zach called for order and the crowd slowly settled down. He introduced himself and the members of the Councils with him and welcomed them to Jefferson.

Zach spoke for an hour to the room, explaining the structure, government, finances and the settlements and the industry at each of them. He explained that anyone who wanted to stay in Questa or Taos was welcome, but anyone who wanted to resettle in any of the other settlements would be welcome there, also. When he spoke of Trinidad, he stressed the fact that the repatriated slaves, mostly women, from the Empire proper had settled there. "The only codicil is that the men between sixteen and thirty are going to be assigned to the troops that were short-handed. Those with ties here will be stationed here, if possible. The fifteen and sixteen year-olds will be sent to the Barracks for training with the other new recruits. The older men would be trained with their new troops.

Gandy was getting more and more restless during Zach's presentation. When Zach finished, he held him back and said, "Zach, we were thinking that these people would stay here. After all, they did come from Albuquerque."

Zach gave him a searching look. "Gandy, like I said, anyone with ties here can stay here, but the rest have a free choice. The troopers will be assigned wherever they are needed." When

Gandy started to protest, Zach interrupted him, “Look. Eleven Troop was transferred from Mitchell. We asked for volunteers, but we would have reassigned some men if we didn’t get enough. There is no question of moving Eleven back, they have been integrated with Taos boys and that is the final word on the situation.

“Give me the names of the troopers who have family here and I will try and assign them to the troops locally, okay?”

Gandy agreed with little grace when he saw that there was nothing he could do and he left with the rest of the Questa Council. Zach watched them leave, knowing that he had not heard the last of it.

“Let’s go to the War Room,” Zach said and started up the street to the City Hall. The other followed him. They entered the War Room and found Giles King and Harry McGregor already there.

Zach set up his computer and projected the image on the back, windowless wall. “Here’s how things stand. I went over the figures last night. Questa has a legitimate claim to twelve troopers. That’s fine; it will fill their losses from that stupid rescue attempt. That will give them four troops of twenty and nearly ten for rangers. The two trainees we take back to Mitchell.

“The inner settlements, Cave Valley, Big Valley, etc., have what they have. Anyone attacking will have to go through somewhere else first or the troops they have can hold the mountain passes until help arrives.

“That leaves Gunnison, which can do with a half dozen and they have three in training, so, we assign three more to them. Palo Duro needs thirteen to bring them up to full strength, but they have a couple in training, so, we assign them eleven. Trinidad needs help; they are short by twelve, plus four rangers. That leaves a couple for Rio Grande.

“Once the training is finished, the troops should be up to optimal strength.”

The meeting broke up and the next few days were spent organizing the remaining escapees. Some wanted to stay in the Taos region, but most wanted to relocate away from the close proximity of Aztecs.

Juan and Ernesto Delgado, Oscar Cannick, Gary Mahon and Sandra Barfield approached Zach one afternoon in the restaurant where he was having coffee and going over the relocation plan. He invited them to sit and they explained that they were from the Farmington region and they wanted to head that way to look for family.

“You heard the deal,” said Zach. “You can leave any time you want. A mount, weapons and supplies will be issued and you can leave as soon as you are ready.”

“Okay,” said Ernesto. “But can we come back if we cannot locate our people?”

“That’s a different matter. That area was swept by troopers before the rescue attempt and anyone wanting to come in was brought back.” He searched through his computer sticks and pulled out one. “Here is the list of people who didn’t want to join us. There weren’t many, except for Durango.

“Have a look at these and see if anybody you know is here.”

They crowded around the screen and scrolled through the short list of names. They did not find anyone they knew, but they still wanted to search. Oscar pointed out that there would be some who would go into hiding when a strange troop of horsemen showed.

Zach agreed with them that all of the people in the area may not have been contacted. He sat for a minute and called over a trooper who was sitting at a nearby table. He asked him to find Ed Soleto and ask him to join them.

After the trooper left, Zach asked the five why they were so sure that they could find family. Their stories were pretty much the same. They had been captured on the road or while otherwise separated from loved ones. Their ranches or farms had been in secluded valleys, not easily surprised by Aztec raiders. By the time they had finished their stories and pointed out the general areas they wanted to search, Ed had come in.

Zach explained their request and asked Ed if there was a possibility of sending out a troop on another sweep of the specified areas.

“Well,” he said, “we were going to send out troops around here and to Santa Fe to get the new boys shaken out. I suppose that a ride there would be just as effective, though it is a longer maneuver than I had planned on.

“Yeah, I’ll send Eleven Troop. When do you want them to be ready?”

They agreed to leave the next morning at dawn and Ed sat down with the five escapees and the leader of Eleven Troop, who was in the restaurant eating lunch. Zach excused himself and left for the Communications Center. He wanted to let them know that he would be finished in Taos by the end of the week and then escorting the escapees to their new homes.

When he arrived, he passed the War Room and Marcus Dinklager of the rangers stopped him. He stepped into the office and saw a stranger who looked like a Navajo. “I just brought him in,” Dinklager said, indicating the stranger. “He said he wanted to talk to you.”

Zach thanked Marcus and invited the Indian to sit. The man declined and said, “I have a long way to go to get back. My daughter asked me to give this to you.” With that, he handed a blanket wrapped box to Zach.

“What’s this all about?” asked Zach, looking at the package.

“My daughter was one of those you brought out of Albuquerque,” he said. “This is a gift for you. A thank you. My daughter is very insistent.”

Zach untied the string with which the package was tied. He carefully unrolled the blanket, a finely crafted piece, red with a black turtle design woven in. The box revealed an eight inch statue of a mouse. It was dressed in a kilt of the same design as the blanket. An axe was in one hand and it was standing in front of a sharp stake looking up at the sky. The piece looked hand-carved and –painted and was very detailed.

Looking puzzled, Zach thanked the man who laughed. “You look confused. I think you will understand when I tell you the story.

“This is carved in the Kachina fashion, though it is not a Kachina. My people, the Hopi, make carvings out of Cottonwood root of the spirits, if you will, of the land and sky. The Kachina’s live half the year on the mesas and half the year with in the settlements. That’s the simple explanation.

“Anyway, there are a few carvings of creatures and people of legend and stories. The Warrior Mouse is from such a legend. There was a hawk bothering a village and the villagers were afraid. The hawk was so fierce that the villagers cowered in their homes. The mouse said that he would kill the hawk for the villagers and they laughed and scoffed at him.

“To make a long story short, the mouse set up a sharpened stake in the ground and taunted the hawk until it dove at him. At the last minute he jumped aside and the hawk impaled himself on the stake, thus ridding the village of the threat.

“My daughter thinks you were as clever as Warrior Mouse in defeating the Aztecs and making them believe they were all dead, thus ridding them of the threat.

“My brother is a master carver. My daughter asked him for this Kachina. John could never refuse Mary anything. Of course, neither can I, for I came all this way to deliver it.”

Zach was speechless. He thanked Long Chee for the delivery and asked him to thank Mary, also. He invited him to stay the night and ride with Eleven Troop in the morning, but Chee refused. He simply shook hands and walked out, leaving Zach touched.

From that time on, until he was a very old man, a Kachina was delivered to Zach at the Taos settlement each year on the same date.

## Chapter 8

### Journey Home

*Summer 2048*

*The rescue went off better than I had expected. Not only did we free over four hundred slaves, Alfonso is taking a permanent dirt nap. The whole thing was a sham, of course, but Harry's troop took a long chance and the escapees could have been slaughtered by the overseers or the guards on the city walls. I wonder what the ramifications will be in the empire. Despite what Morales says, I think a nice little civil war would be a good thing.*

*Anyway, our work here is finished. We have divvied up the escapees and brought up most of the troops to full strength, though twenty is an artificial number we pulled out of the air. Trinidad has the only troops which are still short, at least of the front line settlements.*

*I think I will take a little detour and see what Raphael is up to. With the reavers fighting with each other, it may be time to mop up the remains. It looks like their attack on him was the last hurrah for taking over the old Fundies. Now they are tearing themselves apart without March as a guiding light. Whatever anyone can say about that nutcase, he could have made it work, if he hadn't been assassinated or gone nuts. Reminds me of stories I heard about the first emperor of China. He united the factions, but lost it at the end and started drinking mercury to live forever.*

*I hope the Questa folks are ready to work for the greater good rather than going off on their own. I think there will be a lot more trouble before they buckle down. Even though I understand their feelings about the Aztecs, their actions are the equivalent of us going against*

*the Mahdists a few years back because they made Janissaries of Matt and his boys. We may have felt better, but we would be taking the dirt naps.*

*The Navajos are a real puzzle. Oh, I know that there are other tribes included, but it's easier to brand them with one name until they give us one to use. Anyway, I can't figure out if they were kidding or thought we released their people out of fear. They should know that we don't keep slaves, like I told them, but maybe they were joking. Only time will tell. And Chee, riding all the way from the Four Corners region to deliver a doll from his daughter. I don't even remember her. It is pretty cool, however. He wouldn't even stay and take something to eat before he rode off.*

*It will sure be good to get home and spend some time at The Ranch with the family. I feel pretty guilty about leaving Eduardo handle all the stock, though Ed Young is there, now. The place is almost ready to call it a separate settlement, it has grown so much. By my count, there are four families, seventeen kids there or on the way, eight dogs and a litter pending, two hundred cattle, thirty horses from saddle horses to the big draft horses bred from that farm with the hay wagon, twenty-five sheep, ten llamas and four cats. The cats weren't my idea, but I was overruled by the wives who were worried about rats. I, almost, would rather have the rats, but they are outside animals, and that was their concession, though I have caught the kids trying to sneak one or two inside. Luckily, I'm allergic to the things. Sarah wants a school built, now that Kay is taking teacher training and there are so many ankle biters around.*

*Well, we are heading home tomorrow and I am anxious to get there.*

They made an early start. Ishtar Singh was taking NM158 south to I-25, then east to Palo Duro. Zach was leading his caravan through the mountains from Questa. He had supplies to drop off at Eagle's Nest.



Members from Questa and Taos were there to say their good-byes. There seemed to be a better sense of community, which pleased Zach.

After a final handshake with Ishtar Singh, Zach ordered his wagons north and almost didn't hear Ishtar shout over the hubbub of departure. Zach spun around and tried to catch him, but the crowd was too thick. The big man grinned and waved, leaving Zach dumbfounded. He was sure that he had heard correctly Ishtar invite him to Palo Duro in September for his wedding. He looked at Karl for verification and his friend nodded.

Zach thought about it all the way across the mountains, trying to imagine Ishtar with a wife and little kids. He wondered how his grown children were taking the news.

The trip over the mountains was slow. Several times they had to clear slides and lever boulders off the road. The few families at Eagle's Nest were happy to get the supplies and proudly showed Zach and Karl the defenses they had prepared. All roads and trails to the south had been cut.

They reached Trinidad and Jon Willits was pleased at the number of new settlers and told Zach they he would start planning a new sawmill immediately. The new troopers were turned over to Jerry Carter and Mike Vaughn.

He met with the town council to update them on the rescue operation. There was news from Kansas. The reavers were tearing each other apart. Refugees and scouting expeditions, both, had reported pitched battles between reaver bands. The heart of the old Fundamentalist region was awash with blood. Every band was grabbing what they could. Some were engaging in an orgy of destruction others were hunkered down and defending their own patch of ground..

The Kansans had joined in with the Cherokees, Arkansawyers and Texans to keep the fighting from spilling to the west and south along a line from Lake Texana, Bryan, Tyler and

Paris in Texas; Fort Smith in Arkansas; Tulsa, Oklahoma and Wichita to Seldon in Kansas.

They had several encounters and either destroyed the bands or threw them back over the border.

Raphael reported that hundreds of refugees had bolstered the numbers of the Kansans and Arkansawyers, allowing them to establish more communities along the line.

They did report that they lost all contact with the small settlements in Tennessee and Louisiana. Raphael feared that they had fallen to the reaver bands.

The Texans reported that they were still having trouble with reavers out of Louisiana that didn't seem part of the March group, but the problem wasn't serious. They had been able to destroy the small bands that had appeared. One thing they noted was that there were very few refugees coming from that region. This puzzled them and they were sending patrols to find out why.

Zach decided against mentioning a joint operation with Raphael until he had spoken with the Defense Committee. He would love to sweep through the reavers and put an end to them and reopen the territory to settlers, again. It would also cause the Mahdists to spread their forces thin to protect their southern borders. However, if the Defense Committee wanted to let the reavers kill each other off, he did not want to plant another idea in Raphael's mind.

Their next stop was Gunnison to drop off the new recruits and settlers. There had been a lot of building in anticipation to the change in the seat of government. The old barracks were gone or had been refurbished. A new hall and office complex was standing on the site. Gregory Bronski, who was still the mayor, gave them a tour. The building was shaped like a wheel, with the council chambers the hub. Wide corridors radiated out with offices and meeting rooms opening off them. The place smelled of new lumber and sawdust.

Zach even had his own office as Justice of the Peace, though he had been encouraging the Council to appoint the J.P. at Gunnison as the national J.P. He mentioned to Gregory that he would be resigning as Sergeant at Arms when the capitol had been moved. Bronski tried to convince Zach that he should move to Gunnison, but Zach was not even going to think about it. He had grown roots at The Ranch and he was going to stay.

Their last stop before home was Rio Grande. The settlement had not had any trouble, but was sending patrols out north of Seldon, Kansas. They were sharing the chore with the troops from Mitchell. John Mitchelson, the newly elected mayor, asked Zach if there was any thought of an expedition in the future. The parents and wives of the troopers were concerned.

Zach told him that there were no plans of which he knew, but he had been gone for several weeks. He promised that, when he got home, that he would inquire and let him know. Remembering the code used to initiate the rescue, he told John that if there was to be an expedition, he would congratulate him on the increase in his flocks; otherwise, he would ask him if he had gotten the wolves that were decimating his sheep.

They left the next morning. The six troopers that were being brought for training, the four pregnant girls, Elizabeth Acosta, Karl and Zach took the road north at a rapid pace. For some reason, Elizabeth would not leave Zach's side, much to his discomfort. He spoke with Sarah about it on the radio, asking for advice, and she said to bring her to The Ranch.

The troopers took turns driving the wagon. Every afternoon they setup camp early and Karl continued their training at hand-to-hand combat. After one session, Karl, wiping the sweat from his face with a towel, commented at their progress.

“The boys in Mitchell will have a surprise coming to them when they start this training. A couple of these boys are naturals.” He stretched the kinks from his back and took a taste of the stew Zach was cooking and shook his head. “I’ll sure be glad to get back to Harriet’s cooking.”

Zach left Karl with the stew and took the troopers to drill them in marksmanship and riding. He set up targets and had them fire from their mounts, standing while holding the reins, and prone. He drilled them in rapid fire and paced fire. When they were done, they collected the brass cartridge casings, cleaned their weapons and curried, fed and watered their mounts before eating. One of the first times they had drilled, a trooper had ignored the ‘suggestion’ that their weapons and mounts came first and he had paid for it by being required to clean every weapon in camp and currying all of the mounts. The second time, everyone had paid, by standing in formation while anyone with a weapon that was judged by Karl not to be clean enough cleaned his weapon again and cared for his mount again. Since then, there had not been an incident of a dirty weapon or an uncared for mount.

They arrived in Mitchell with the new troopers and girls. ‘Doc’ White and his duty nurse took the girls in for a checkup and general care. The troopers were turned over to Carl Smythe and Jason Costler. Zach and Karl promised to attend the Council meeting the next afternoon and rode home.

They were greeted by the denizens of The Ranch. In the uproar, no one paid much attention to Elizabeth until Anne noticed the small, red-headed girl sitting white-faced in the wagon they had brought from town. She sat clutching her small bundle of possessions, with tears running down her face.

Immediately, Sarah, Anne, Kay, Mary and Harriett mad a fuss over her. They brought her inside and made her comfortable in Kay’s old room. Kay and Mary stayed with her, getting

her settled. The younger children stood in the doorway staring at her. She finally went to sleep and the two younger wives brought the children down.

The rest of the day was spent in swapping stories of the rescue and the happenings on The Ranch and in the surrounding communities. Eduardo had hunted down a cougar that was attacking the stock, he wanted to make a fireplace rug out of the skin, but Anne adamantly refused to hear of it. John had treated a couple of cases of an udder disease that had afflicted the milk cows. William carried in several puppies from a new litter and little Sarah tried to bring in some kittens.

Zach brought out the Kachina given him and passed it around. Sarah was enchanted by the carving and she insisted that it be placed in a position of honor on the mantle. He told the legend of the Warrior Mouse and sternly informed the children that the statuette was not a toy and to handle it only when given permission. Little Sarah was very disappointed when told she could not sleep with it.

When there was a few minutes when the men could be alone, Eduardo took them aside, “There is something odd going on in the mountains above The Ranch. When I was hunting the cougar, I had come across a campsite. It had not been there a month before. I know because I thought that we should bring some wood and supplies and build a cache. It is on a point overlooking the trail, which is an eyebrow on the mountainside. Anyone wanting to follow would have to stick to the trail. It is under an overhang, a deep one, which would provide shelter for several men and their mounts. The rock is shaped so that it is hard to direct a ricochet into the opening. Anyway, any tracks had been washed out by the last rain.

“Later that week, Refuse, that roan stallion, escaped with a couple of mares. I was going to trail them the next day. In the morning, they were back in the corral. I found some smudges, but no real tracks.”

They discussed the mystery of who was up there until called to the table. The women had provided a welcome home feast for Zach and Karl for which Sarah gave most of the credit to Kay and Mary.

Before dinner, Sarah disappeared upstairs and brought Elizabeth down. She was shy and reserved, at first, but the children’s continual chatter brought her out of her shell and she was soon playing with the puppies with the rest. Zach knew that they had another permanent addition to the family. He thought to himself that they should open an orphanage.

The next day, Eduardo led them around and showed Zach and Karl the field where the new calves, lambs, foals and young llamas were pastured. William called it the nursery. Karl was amused to see how the boy emulated the movements of his father. He put his foot on the lower bar of the corral when Zach did. He spat whenever Zach did, walked with his hands shoved in his front pockets, and wore his hat at the same angle. He was at the age where he wanted nothing more than to please his father and Zach gave him a lot of attention and praise.

When they rode into town, Zach gave him the responsibility of taking charge of his horse. As a reward, Zach gave him a chit and told him to buy something for himself from the Commissary.

Karl and Zach went to the Town Hall and joined the rest of the Councilors. They gave them a complete rundown on the rescue operation and the results of the reassignments. Carl was pleased that the troops were filling out and reported that the new troopers were coming along well and could be sent back to their homes in a few weeks.

Zach reported his impressions of the Navajos, saying that they seemed to be neutral at this stage, but O'Malley and Waters were sending out trade feelers to them. Regardless of whether they finally warmed up, they were a solid bulwark against the Aztecs and would keep them from sending expeditions or settlers north.

Zach brought up the current situation with the reavers and Benton Robison said they had been in contact with Raphael and were monitoring the situation. They briefly discussed an expedition against the reavers, but Carl felt the time was not ripe for a push.

There had been a message from New Africa while Zach and Karl were gone. It reported that there was an easing of all pressure from the Mahdists. They suspected that something had happened politically. Several prisoners had informed them that half the troops had been recalled to the capitol of New Mecca and all hostilities had been suspended.

The Mormons had sent word that there was a movement of people out of Canada into Columbia and Washington. They blamed it on the harsh winters, something the citizens of Jefferson had also noticed. Winters were getting longer and more brutal. Edna Bourne, the meteorologist, was convinced that the world was undergoing global cooling. .

The southward migration had, thus far, been peaceful and the wanderers had been welcomed and had settled on unused land. Carl said that they should keep an eye on the situation, but did not think that it would affect them, yet. Several of the migrants had asked permission to travel to Texas and be transported to Cuba to join their fellow Jews.

Carl had contacted the Sioux and Texans and gotten permission from them. The Texans would contact the Israelis to send a ship when the wanderers arrived.

For the next month, Zach, Karl, Ed and John worked with the foals, gentling them and preparing them for riding or hauling. Trinidad had asked for four of the draft horses for use at

the new mill. Between training sessions with the horses, they had erected a three-room school house and Harriett and Kay had taken charge of the children's education.

Elizabeth had come out of her shell. She was still quiet, but that was her nature. Lizzie, as she liked to be called, was a big help with the children and was very good with a needle and thread and enjoyed sitting and mending while listening to Karl's wild stories or Zach's and Eduardo's tales of history and famous people. She often was found humming to herself at the loom or spindle. Sarah encouraged her to sing and discovered that she had a clear, bell-toned voice with incredible range.

The vegetable and herb garden was supplying their needs and the young fruit trees were starting to bear. They slaughtered their own animals for meat or hunted in the hills surrounding The Ranch. When William turned eight, Eduardo and Zach took him on his first hunt and he brought down a fat turkey. He was elated at his success until he found out that he had to pluck and dress it. However, he beamed with pride when it was presented as the main course for dinner.

That night, when Zach and Sarah were sitting on the front porch enjoying the dying sun and the vivid colors of the sunset, he said, "I never want to leave this place, you know. I have never been happier. It is really a perfect place with family and friends and work and play.

"I am resigning as J.P. and won't leave you and the kids for weeks at a time, again. I promise."

Sarah smiled and chuckled. "Right on time," she thought. Whenever Zach spent any length of time at home, he promised never to leave them again. She sighed contentedly and snuggled against her man, happy that he still wanted to stay with them.



As Zach quietly smoked, Sarah wandered over the past in her mind. She was remembering the horror of Rawlins and how she fell in love with Zach. It seemed that she would hate all men, after her treatment by the reavers, but his non-judgmental manner towards her and the other women released her from her shame and guilt. She smiled at how Grace O'Malley suspected her feelings and conspired with the others to throw her together with Zach.

He had been so skittish. He was always saying that he was bound for the mountains as soon as things were settled in Mitchell. She knew that he was never going to ask her, so she just had the bans published and hoped for the best. She was pleasantly surprised when he did not even say anything, but just showed up at the church on the appointed day.

She smiled again at the puzzled look on his face when she whispered to him at the altar, "I didn't know if you would show up." He just shook his head as if she was talking nonsense and replied, "Why?".

As she roamed back to the present, she felt, again, the ghost of the babies in her womb, how they grew and kicked. The births and Zach's first words upon seeing each one, "Ugly things, aren't they?" though he was proud of every one.

Zach noticed the glistening tears on her face and became concerned. "What's the matter? Why are you crying? Is it me?"

She laughed and wiped the moisture away with the sleeve of her blouse. "Oh, shut up. Can't a girl cry when she's happy, love?"

## Chapter 9

### A Different Kind of Refugee

*Summer 2048*

*Things are going so well here that I am not sure that there isn't another shoe ready to drop. We have great friends at the Ranch, the kids are all healthy and the crops and herds are doing great. The troops are filling out and, barring another fight, we will be at peak strength and operation efficiency, as they used to say.*

*From what we have heard from Taos, the two towns are cooperating and getting with the program. Their troops have melded well, according to Ed Soleto and they are still pulling in supplies from Santa Fe. The mills are producing lumber and ores, the herds are doing well and the transplanted fruit and nut trees are flourishing.*

*There is some trade with the Pueblo and I think that, if not allies, they will become friends in the future.*

*But, like I say, I am afraid that things are going too well and there is a shoe dropping as I write.*

Towards the end of August, the phone rang. Kay called for Zach and told him that Carl was on the phone for him. Sarah smiled. She knew that they were going to ask Zach to do something and he was going to agonize over his promise not to leave. By the time all was said and done, he would leave because Sarah would shove him out the door.

Zach spoke with Carl for a few minutes, at times heatedly, but finally agreed to join them at the Guest House in the Pasture. He turned to Sarah and said, "There are some people that will only speak to me. I tried to tell him no, but, well..."

“Oh, get out of here,” Sarah said.

After a hurried shower, Zach rode to Mitchell and down to the Pasture. He pulled up to the Guest House and dismounted, throwing the reins to a waiting trooper. Carl was waiting for him and he said, “Zach, I want you to hear these people out. Okay?”

“What’s going on, Carl. I was in the middle of training horses for Trinidad. And why are you here, not Grace? She’s the mayor, now.”

“Just listen, okay?” was all Carl would say. He let Zach precede him into the room and blocked the door so he couldn’t leave, which is what he tried to do when he saw the visitors.

They were Mahdists. Zach could tell by their beards and the green scarf one of them wore. It was a common sign that he had completed his pilgrimage to New Mecca and met the Mahdi. They rose as he entered the room and looked at him apprehensively. This was the man about whom stories were told to frighten naughty children.

Carl pushed the protesting Zach to a chair. Zach sat, his face clouded with anger. Grace, seated next to him, reached over and patted his arm, as if that would calm him down.

“Zach,” she started, “these men would like to speak with you about something.”

With poor grace Zach folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. He nodded at the visitors. They introduced themselves.

“Sir,” the oldest Muslim started. “We have escaped from the Caliphate, much as you had. We are looking for a home where we can live in peace. I have twenty families with me.

“Things have changed recently, in the Caliphate. The Mahdi is dead. How, only a few know. Currently, there is a power struggle between three men. Two are members of the Imam Council on Purity and the other is a general who was fighting in the north.

“We took this opportunity to gather what we could and escape. Now, we are coming to you for help.”

Zach unfolded his arms and sat forward, his forearms resting on the table. “Answer me this. Will you accept our laws over the Koran?”

Imam Hussein Conrad bowed his head. “I am sorry, we cannot. We are bound by the laws of Allah.”

“Then, I don’t see how we can help you. Your Koran tells you to kill or convert unbelievers. We are all unbelievers, here. Are we going to wake up one night with your knives at our throats?”

“No, we believe in conversion, not killing.”

“And if we don’t want to be converted? When does your patience run out? And how about our customs? We don’t observe Ramadan or pray five times a day. Our women don’t cover up like yours do. Our women can hold office, vote, own property; walk out with a man without chaperones. These aren’t things you are comfortable with, are they?”

The imam looked uncomfortable. “No, they are not,” he admitted.

Zach got up and walked to the sideboard. He picked up a bottle of wine and turned. “Would you like some refreshment?”

The lips of the men tightened in disapproval.

“No? Are you going to ask for all sorts of nonsense that my father used to talk about; foot washing stations, special allowances in business and school for prayer, all the other catering to your demands. I mean, the British changed the story of the three little pigs to be about puppies, for God’s sake.

“We raise pigs, we eat pigs, we wear pigskin. Dogs are pets, we have them in our houses, they help the shepherds and cattle herders and llama herders.

“Women hold office. They vote. They wear as much or as little as they want. We sit together with them. Share food. They own property and you would have to deal with them as equals.

“What happens if one of your young men decides to become a Christian or a Sikh or a Buddhist, or whatever? Doesn’t the Koran say that they must be killed?”

The men shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“Hell, you are talking to me, rather than our mayor, Gail O’Malley, who is sitting right here. Gentlemen, I sympathize with you. Anyone who is trying to escape the Mahdists is to be helped, but not at the expense of the peace and security of this community.”

“Is there not somewhere we can go?” Ali Goff asked, pleadingly.

Gail asked Zach to sit down. She turned to the Muslims and said, “The land is available, but it is claimed. The New Africans are north of you, the Sioux and Mormons are to the northwest. To the east are the Kansans; south of them are the Cherokees, Arkansawyers and Texans. Beyond them are the reavers. We claim the Rockies and the foothills. West of the Rockies there are the Navajos, Bear Flaggers, Madisonians, Oregonians, Washingtonians and Columbians; south of us and them are the Aztecs.

“There may be open land north of the Navajos, but it is mostly desert.”

Zach sighed and said, “The Israelis abandoned Florida and moved to Cuba. I don’t know if anyone is occupying their old lands, but that is a possibility, if your neighbors are tolerant. We don’t know what is east of the reavers and I would doubt that twenty families would survive crossing reaver territory.”

“Are there ships along the coast?” the third member of the Muslim party, Yasser Jones asked.

“I suppose there are,” answered Carl. “What shape they are in is anybody’s guess. We can give you safe passage to Palo Duro, but I can’t vouch for what the Texans would agree to and we and the Aztecs are barely on speaking terms.”

Grace agreed to send a message to the Texans immediately. The imam asked permission to move to the pasture for safety’s sake. They were worried about pursuit by Mahdist troops.

Zach and Carl were vehemently opposed to this and said they could camp at the Mound. A warning shot would bring a troop from the Pasture and they would step up patrols, but under no circumstances would they be allowed in.

Goff was angry, but Conrad bowed to the inevitable and agreed.

After they had been escorted out of the valley, Grace chided the two men for their attitude. Zach was surprised and asked Grace if she had forgotten what it was like living under the Mahdists.

“Of course not. But these people are refugees and we have always opened our arms to refugees from the Mahdists.”

“Grace, their way of life is different from ours. I’m not saying that they are bad people or anything, but they have a strict religious code of conduct. We have our own code of conduct, but it is vastly different from theirs. The two are not compatible. If they find a place to live nearby, I don’t care,” Carl returned. “If they are good neighbors, then I am a good neighbor. I’ll obey their laws when I go there, but I expect them to obey ours.”

“We have a law against slavery, they don’t. If they bring slaves to Mitchell, I will free them. If they don’t like it, don’t bring slaves. Period.”

Distracted from the basic question, Grace asked, “Do they have slaves?”

Carl, with a grim look, answered, “I will check it out. If they do, then the slaves will be freed and I expect you and the council to back me up.”

“Of course we will, Carl. You find out, but, please, no violence.”

Carl turned to Zach. “Zach, do you want to come along?”

At Zach’s nod, Carl called a trooper in and asked him to call The Barracks and have Matt, whose troop was on reserve duty, assemble his troop and report to the Front Gate. Carl handed Grace up to her buckboard and watched her drive towards Mitchell.

He then went to the officer of the day, Kim Allen, and told him to turn out his troop and have them ready if there was trouble at the Mound. They were only to leave the valley if they were summoned. Until then, they were to remain at the Throat to cover the retreat of One Troop. Under no circumstances were they to advance and leave the Front Gate unguarded without orders.

An hour later, Matt and his troop rode up to the Front Gate. Carl quickly explained the situation and the mission. Five men were to remain at a distance and provide cover fire should there be a problem.

Imam Conrad greeted them at the edge of their camp at the Mound. Carl asked him if there was anyone held against their will in the camp. The imam hesitated and then replied in the negative.

Because of the hesitation, Carl asked him to assemble his party. When they had congregated, Carl asked if any of them were being held against their will. He assured them that they would be protected and taken to Mitchell from where they would be repatriated, to wherever they wanted.

A stir at the back of the crowd caught Zach's attention. He forced his mount through the crowd and saw a woman struggling in the arms of two men. He drew his pistol and fired a shot into the air. The men halted and the woman, dressed in full Muslim garb, broke free. She ran to Zach and clutched his stirrup.

The imam rushed up. The troopers had readied their weapons and were covering the crowd of frightened people. Those with weapons dropped them at Carl's order.

Zach looked at the woman and asked, "Is there a problem?"

She pointed in the direction of the two men. "They kidnapped me from my family. I refused to marry the pig with the long beard."

Zach looked at the two men, then at the imam. "Imam Conrad, slavery is prohibited here and we consider forced marriage as slavery. This woman will return with us." He looked over the assemblage and asked, "Anyone else? If you are being held against your will, speak now."

A young boy of about twelve raised his hand. Carl beckoned him forward. "A couple of years ago, they killt my family and gave me and my sister to those people," he said pointing to an angry looking couple. Carl told him to get his sister and come back.

Two others came forward, a young man of fourteen and a girl of twenty. The boy's story was much the same as the twelve-year old, his family had been killed and he had been assigned a devout Muslim family.

The girl told of being taken from her family and married to a high official of the government, who had been very elderly and died soon after the marriage. Subsequently, she had been claimed by another official and had become a servant in his household. Her husband's sons had sworn that the girl had only been a concubine. She had heard about the escape from a wife of the imam and had joined them. As she was talking she tore off her burqa.



Zach led the five to where Matt was waiting at one end of the line of troopers. He asked him to send for a wagon and to bring back six or seven members of the Auxiliaries and half of Four Troop. As he complied, Zach dismounted and spoke with the five. He asked them if there were any others who would be afraid to talk or too young to know what was happening.

Jane Toland, the servant, said, "There are two children that were given to the Imam and one of the other families, sir."

Zach wanted the additional troops before he started taking children. He was trying to figure the easiest way to accomplish this without turmoil and a possible pitched battle. He finally decided and asked Andrew Churchill to use his squad to move the Muslims to the left of their camp.

By the time the refugees had been moved away from the tents, the wagon, six Auxiliaries and Kim and his half troop arrived. Zach asked Jane to identify the two children and bring them to him. He turned over the other four to the Auxiliaries, who sat their mounts with weapons at the ready.

Escorted by the half troop from Four Troop, Jane took the children by the hand and brought them to Zach. He had Donna White and Peggy Paine Parker look over the small group that had been separated from the fugitives.

The little girl was frightened and clung to Peggy. The boy was five and he said his name was Suleiman George, but his real name was William Trask. Zach asked him if he wanted to go back to his foster parents. William simply said no and walked to the wagon brought by the troopers.

Carl turned to the imam who had followed Jane and had been listening. "Do you have any more?"

Imam Conrad ignored the question and said, “Those are our children. You have no right to steal them from us.”

“Those children were stolen from their families and given to you to raise. The Trask boy doesn’t want to stay with you and the little girl is too young to ask and we will take charge of her. Do you happen to know where the families of any of these are at the present time? We will send them back, if we can.”

Conrad sullenly said, “They are all dead, except for the family of Fatima Sullivan.”

Carl thought for a moment and then said, “All right. We will let it stand until and unless I find out otherwise.

“Before we go, is there anything you need?”

“You would still assist us?” asked the surprised imam.

“Of course. Mrs. O’Malley promised to contact the Texans and nothing has changed. All we did was remove anyone who didn’t belong here.”

Conrad asked for some food and Carl nodded and left. The seven that were taken from the fugitives were placed in the wagon. Roya Smith, the three-year old cried until Peggy climbed into the wagon with her.

Matt’s trooper provided the rear guard and Kim’s half troop and the Auxiliaries escorted the wagon. They rode back through the Throat. Carl dismissed Matt’s troop and thanked the troopers for a job well done. He rode off with One Troop to The Barracks, leaving Zach to take the children and the Auxiliaries to Mitchell.

Zach rode after the wagon and found Grace O’Malley waiting at the hospital. The seven were escorted inside for a more complete examination. Fatima Sullivan was hesitant about this until she learned that the doctor on duty was Grace Allen.

After they entered the hospital, Grace turned on Zach. It was easy to see that she was angry. Her severe look and tight lips told Zach that he was in line for a lecture. In her best teacher manner she said, “Zach, how could you. That was the rudest display of which I have ever heard. You take the two troop leaders who have the most for which to hate the Mahdists AND you take Auxiliaries.

“Did not you think that they would resent uncovered women with weapons and sitting on horses to put the girls on a higher level than the Muslim men? Did you consider how it would inflame the situation? These are refugees and they may be allies at some future date. I would have expected them to be treated with kid gloves.”

Zach was getting angry, himself. When Grace stopped to take a breath, he inserted, “Mrs. O’Malley, I don’t really care what offends these people. I used the two troops who were on duty, I didn’t specifically ask for Matt or Kim. The Muslims had seven captives, slaves if you will. I freed those seven and brought them back. And, yes, I offended them, but I’m not very politically correct and if they are offended by something as trivial as this, then I don’t particularly want them for allies. Because, as allies, they would start making demands and insisting on concessions and I don’t feel like giving any to them.

“You were part of that village with the Wrights and the Santinis. Matt and his boys got you out of there and freed you, so you should have a little bit of that hatred for the Mahdists yourself. Now, do something constructive and ask the Sullivan woman what she wants to do.” He turned abruptly and walked to his horse and rode to find Carl. Gail stood on the steps with her mouth open, at a loss for words.

He found Carl in his War Room office and sat down heavily in a chair. He related what had happened with Grace. “We have to find out what the Sullivan girl wants to do. And there

are the Castleman kids, Jane Toland and Bob Brown. The two youngest will be put up for adoption, unless we have some record of their families.”

Carl wrote down the names and promised to contact Raphael. He told Zach that he shouldn't worry about Grace. They went over the duty roster and rearranged the schedule so that the fugitives would be watched, patrols sent to patrol the border and the Front Gate properly manned, though they did not expect any trouble from the fugitives.

As Zach left, Carl asked him to arrange for a wagonload of supplies for the fugitives, warning him jokingly not to include any swine products. Zach snorted and left for the Commissary.

The children ended up being adopted by families in Mitchell. Jane Toland joined the auxiliaries and volunteered to train as a doctor and was the troop medic. Fatima Sullivan was escorted to the border with the Caliphate by Auxiliary Troop A and Three Troop. After a few days of waiting, she was turned over to a Mahdist patrol. The fugitives were escorted to Palo Duro and turned over to a troop of Texans who led them to a small town on the coast where they found several fishing vessels. The Texans helped them make the boats seaworthy and saw them off.

Raphael reported that a strong reaver force had been met near Tulsa and, with the assistance of the Cherokees and Arkansawyers, had been destroyed. The prisoners told of constant combat between three reaver bands in eastern Missouri. It seemed that they were exhausting themselves and decimating each other's forces. The men said that anyone not affiliated with a big band was attacked without mercy and they had been forced to move west to escape.

The Kansan felt that the time was coming when a combined force could eliminate the remaining reavers. He said that he would send several scouting parties to locate the bands' headquarters and study the terrain for a possible ambush.

## Chapter 10

### The Appletons

*Fall 2048*

*I'm glad I'm finished with all this roaming and scheming. I know that Sarah doesn't believe it, but I am a homebody, now. This little escape junket was my last official duty. I am part of the militia and I am sleeping in my bed from now on.*

*Lizzie is a big help, now that Kay and Mary have gotten themselves married. I know that they would still help, but they have their own house to keep and, from what I hear, there are a couple of ankle biters on board. I wonder if Sarah is pregnant, again. That would make nine, for me. Unless she has twins, again. No, she would have told me, I'm sure.*

*Eduardo and John did a great job while Karl and I were gone. The young look good and the place looks great. The only dark spot is that camp and the return of the horses. That stallion has a perfect name, Refuse. He does nothing but refuse. If he wasn't the fastest horse I have, I would geld and sell him. He is always trying to run off. I just wonder who caught him and returned him and the mares. Are they one and the same person, or is there more than one?*

*Tomorrow, Eduardo and I are going hunting on the mountain. Anne said she wanted an elk roast and there was a herd browsing in the high country around the lake at this time of year. William wants to go, but I don't want him along if there is a stranger up there and there's trouble.*

*Grace O'Malley is probably going to make a fine mayor, but she is too soft-hearted. Look at how many kids she adopted, for example. However, this thing with the Muslims. She, of all people, should know how impossible it is to incorporate them into the community. I hate to say it, but it is almost impossible for believers and non-believers to live under a set of laws that*

*the believers insist applies to everybody, or should. Laws were not created to keep people from being offended. If something offends you, stay away from whatever it is; don't try to get everyone to change. Like that big flap we studied at the turn of the century. The Muslims got all offended by some political cartoons about Mohammed or Allah. Instead of denouncing them and boycotting the country that published them, Denmark, I think; they rioted and threatened to kill the cartoonists. That is what I mean; the Muslims thought being offended trumped the First Amendment's Freedom of Speech. And then, Iran published cartoons offensive to the Jews. Where was their suppression of free speech then? They finally got one of the cartoonists in 2017. The Muslims sure carry a grudge. I remember when I wrote a paper on the subject, my professor gave me a C-. He said it was a sound, well-researched piece but unkind. Unkind was what got my grade dropped. He was in favor of rewriting history so no one got their feelings hurt. What a jerk.*

A banging on the door of the bedroom snapped Zach out of a sound sleep. He told Sarah to stay in bed. As he pulled up his jeans, he saw that it was barely dawn. The horizon showed a tinge of red, signaling the coming day.

He jerked open the door and frightened Lizzie. Keeping his temper, he stepped into the hall and asked, "What's the matter?"

"He's gone, Zach," she answered.

Zach shook his head to clear the last of the cobwebs. "Who is missing?"

"William. I got up to use the bathroom and checked on the kids. His bed hasn't been slept in."

Zach rushed up the stairs and burst into his eldest son's room. When he snapped on the light, he saw that Lizzie was right. William had snuck out the window. He had climbed onto the

roof of the porch and dropped to the ground. He saw where he had broken a collector on the solar panel. Upon closer inspection, Zach saw that his coat and rifle were also missing. Karl had built him a gun rack of his own after he had bagged the turkey.

Zach told Lizzie to wake Eduardo and tell him to saddle two horses and a pack mule. He hurried back to his bedroom and started dressing. Sarah got up immediately and began putting together a pack with food and filled the two big canteens.

By the time Eduardo brought the mounts, Zach had brought out the camping equipment he had stacked by the door the previous evening. Quickly, the two men loaded the pack mule. Zach told Sarah they were heading for the high country lake and to tell Karl and have him get a party of men. He gave her a quick kiss and the men left their wives and were riding out of the yard fifteen minutes after Lizzie had first awakened Zach.

Eduardo, who was a skilled tracker, picked up the tracks of William's horse leading up to the high country lake where they had talked of finding the elk. They made good time, but William was four or five hours ahead of them.

Zach agonized over the mysterious stranger on the mountain and young William being alone and almost defenseless. He wanted to gallop headlong up the trail, but it was too dangerous and would do no one any good if he managed to fall into the narrow valley below. At the top of the first rise, they stopped to give their mounts a blow and searched what they could see of the trail ahead of them.

Eduardo squatted and reassured himself that they were still on William's trail. He told Zach that the tracks were fresher. William was traveling slowly along the narrow trail. He arranged rocks to form an arrow and mounted.



They ate a breakfast of cold biscuits and meat in the saddle, washing it down with water from their canteens. At noon they took another break. They were only four or five miles from the lake and the tracks were getting fresher.

A few minutes after they had started out again, they heard a shot. The echo whip-cracked back and forth in the mountains. Zach spurred his horse to a run and, as he entered the meadow near the lake a half hour later, saw his son standing at the foot of tree from which hung the carcass of an elk.

William turned when he heard the hoof beats of his father's horse. He froze, his knife poised in the act of skinning the animal. As he rode up a voice called out, "Hold it right there, mister."

As Zach pulled up, William called out, "No, wait. That's my dad."

A man stepped from behind another tree and grounded his rifle. It was a .30-06 Winchester. One of the 2030 models with a self-adjusting, laser scope. "Howdy," the man said.

He was dressed in beautifully tanned buckskins. He stood about five feet, nine inches and was heavysset, though not much looked like fat. His grizzled hair was cut short and he had a ragged moustache over a mouth which had known humor. With his eye glasses, he made Zach think of the head of Teddy Roosevelt carved into Mount Rushmore. His eyes snapped to Eduardo, who rode out of the trees at the fringe of the meadow with his rifle raised. He grinned and looked back at Zach.

"The name's Leo. Leo Appleton. Saw the boy here, about dawn. He told me what he wanted and I told him the best time to get one.

"Sharp lad, you got there. We had us a good long talk."

"Dad," interrupted William. "Come look."

Zach dismounted. He glanced at Eduardo and said, "Watch him, Ed."

Leo laughed and leaned his rifle against the tree. "I'm real peaceful, boys. Real peaceful."

Zach walked over to William. He saw where the elk had been gutted. The ground had been dug up and the offal dumped in and covered. On a piece of hide lay the liver and kidneys. William proudly showed off his kill. He had to stand on a stump to reach high enough to finish the skinning. Zach praised the size and quality of the beast and asked him what had happened and how he met Mr. Appleton.

"I got here about dawn and set up a blind like you showed me. Over there," he said, pointing at a spot near where Eduardo had emerged. He looked ashamed when he admitted, "I guess I fell asleep, waiting. When I woke up, Mr. Appleton was sitting there on a log. I was scared, at first, but he gave me some breakfast or lunch and we talked.

"When the elk came out of the woods, he helped me pick out a good one and I got it. It just dropped and we strung it up and let the blood out and the guts and stuff. He was showing me how to skin it when you showed up."

Zach turned to Leo and thanked him for watching out for the boy.

"Wasn't a big deal. Gutsy kid, up here all alone. Said he wanted to show you he could do it. Wanted to make you proud," he said.

He glanced at Eduardo and continued, "Your buddy looks like he doesn't trust me, though."

Eduardo was still sitting his horse ten yards away, his rifle in this hands, ready to shoot, if necessary. Zach waved him in and the young Hispanic dismounted. When he hung his weapon

on the saddle horn and tied his horse to a convenient bush, Leo put two fingers to his mouth and let out a blasting whistle.

He looked at Zach and said, "The boys are probably getting tired out there."

Zach looked around and grinned as three figures stepped out of the trees. They were placed to cover the trail and the whole meadow. The each carried a weapon tucked in the crook of their arms.

"These are my boys. Daniel, the oldest. Jason in the middle and my youngest, Gregg. My wife's back at the camp. She's Cathy. Rules us with an iron hand, ain't that right boys?"

Gregg got a fire going and Daniel helped William finish dressing his kill. Jason set out to their camp to bring his mother. Leo said that they were ready to head out anyway. He had been scouting the area around the lake when he came upon William.

He hadn't wanted to leave the boy and knew that someone would be following after and they may not be in too good a mood and might get 'hasty'.

"I told the boys to hold up their mother and spread out in case those following weren't friendly. A little insurance. They heard you coming and let me know, so I could get behind that tree."

"If you don't mind my asking what are you doing here?" Zach said.

"We came here when things started going to pot. My folks had a place way up in the mountains. It was an old hunting lodge my grandfather built. Up above Steamboat Springs. We had been stocking it for years with canned goods, clothing, camping equipment and all. Me and the boys hauled up solar panels. We had a lot of books. We brought up school books and a lot of paper. That was heavy, let me tell you. Boxes of the stuff.

“Jason is the artist and we knew that we needed a lot of supplies for him. Daniel, he’s the math whiz and thinker. Gregg, now, he picks up a book any chance he gets. Doesn’t need a lot of conversation and good in the woods. The best tracker of the lot.

“As the boys got older, we decided that we had to get them to civilization before they turned into real heathens. I scouted through the pass between Bear and Flattop Mountains. I saw the settlements there, but there were too many people, so I looked around until I saw your place.

“You’ll have to forgive me, but I listened at your window a few times to hear what you sounded like and find out what you were thinking.” He grinned at the look on Zach’s face.

“Didn’t the dogs smell you?” asked Zach, who had always depended on his dogs to warn him of trouble.

Leo laughed. “It’s like this. You lost some clothes didn’t you?”

“Yeah, Karl said that his work coat and overalls were missing from the shed where he last used them when he made the bookshelves for Anne.”

“My wife will have them cleaned and patched and we’ll bring them back. Anyway, I wore them around the houses. The dogs weren’t too sure about who I was, but I fed them some meat I brought along and they decided that I belonged. I liked what I heard and decided to bring the family in.”

Eduardo spoke for the first time, “You found Refuse and the mares.”

“It was the least I could do,” he said.

“Thanks,” said Zach, at a loss for words at the news of the comings and goings of this man who took it for granted that he could just slip onto The Ranch and out again without being detected. “I should give him the job of training the rangers,” he thought.

The skillet was hot by this time and Leo showed William how to cut off some backstrap and they fried it up. Jason came out of the woods leading a woman of about Leo's height, but younger. Leo explained out of the side of his mouth that she was riding because she had arthritis in her knees, pretty bad. Jason lifted her down from her mount and led her to a fallen tree where he cleared a place for her to sit. She was forthright and had a round, pretty face, her hair tied back with a leather thong. Unlike Leo and her sons, who wore buckskins, she had on jeans and a wool shirt. Her grip was strong and Zach and Eduardo soon found she had a dry sense of humor and an inordinate pride in her family. She wore a .9mm pistol at her waist and Zach knew that she would not hesitate to use it, if necessary.

Zach and Eduardo brought out the rest of their food and they made a pleasant meal of it with the Appletons. As time went on, Zach knew these were solid, no nonsense people. The kind that did their work, expected you to do yours, but were not above helping out any way necessary. They didn't want or need praise and brushed off thanks like dust on their clothes.

It was nearing dusk when they finished cleaning up and packing the elk on the packhorse. Zach was anxious to get back to The Ranch and let Sarah know that William was safe, so they decided to travel at night.

In addition to the packhorse, each of the boys had a large pack. Leo and Cathy had smaller ones, Leo explaining that he had a bad back from a fall several years earlier. When Zach asked what happened to their cabin, Cathy replied that it was locked up and they would worry about that when the time came.

They met Karl and the Second Rangers halfway back. They reached The Ranch after midnight and the yard was ablaze with lights. Sarah took William, who had spent the last half of

the journey asleep in his father's arms, and put him to bed. The elk was taken to the cool shed, which was a small, insulated building cooled by a compressor.

Introductions were made and, when Zach suggested that the children be shuffled around, Leo would not hear of it. His sons set up tent cots in the schoolhouse and, after washing up, everyone went to bed. The rangers bedded down in the hayloft of the barn.

Zach undressed and climbed into bed, after washing the road dust off. He told Sarah the whole story, but didn't know when she drifted off to sleep. He kissed her and whispered that he loved her and went to sleep immediately.

The next morning after breakfast, Zach and Leo sat on the porch. Zach had a cup of coffee, the last until the next trading expedition to the Aztecs arrived. They were talking about the future and the Appleton family plans.

"If I had my choice," Leo said, "I would stay in the high country and be happy, but the boys need to mix. Now, Cathy would be happy if they never left home, but they need to fly."

"If you join us, there are rules," answered Zach. He went on to explain the new Constitution, the State of Jefferson, the states along the west coast which had adopted the same document, but were independent from each other. The required of service for each male over the age of sixteen. .

"Makes sense, but what about taxes? If you don't have money how do you run the government?"

"That would be a question for Daniel rather than me. From what you have said, he's the math wizard. But what we have done so far is to barter goods and services. When there isn't barter, we have chits which are for an hours' service. The commissary takes them in for supplies and gives them out in exchange for goods and services. If you have more than eighty chits at the

commissary, you have to work it off doing road building and other public works or working somehow for the community. The troopers get paid one chit a day, just for being troopers and two when they are on duty.

“If you don’t redeem your chits, no one will trade with you and if you don’t work for the government when required, you are brought up before the Justice of the Peace and you could get banished.

“We take care of the widows and orphans, the sick and anyone who is unable to work, but there is no welfare state, like before the Troubles. We are such a small community that we can’t afford drones.”

“How does the commissary get the stuff they sell?” asked Daniel, who had joined them.

“The common food plot, down in the Pasture. The government cattle herds. The government doesn’t own much, but those two are there so that people can work off their debts. There is nothing that prevents me or you from raising cattle or food and selling it to the Commissary. In fact, when I need to redeem chits or have a project, I undercut the government price for cattle and sell to the Commissary or directly to the butcher.”

“How is the price set, though?” queried Daniel. “Couldn’t the Commissary undercut you?”

“There never has been a real shortage and the Council decided that there should be a floor below which the government can’t drop prices. Remember, the government raised food supplies have two purposes; to let debtors work off chits and to make sure that there is a surplus to protect against rough times.”

“Something doesn’t sound right,” said Daniel, shaking his head.

“I’m not an economist,” Zach said. “Maybe this will help. I have cattle and horses. There is a new mill in Trinidad and they need four horses to haul timber. You and your family are going to build a house. I hire you to drive the horses to Trinidad and I get a load of lumber in payment. When you return, I give you half of that load as payment for working for me. Meanwhile, Jason has fourteen chits he has earned for being a trooper. He takes my chits from the Commissary rather than government chits. With those, he buys the other half of the load of lumber. You build your house and I retire some debt.

Daniel nodded. It was a clumsy system, but it worked with a small community.

“Now, back to your question of where the Commissary gets stuff,” continued Zach. “When a salvage party goes out and brings back clothes, fixtures, weapons, whatever, it goes to the Commissary. For normal stuff, like clothes, people just go in and buy them with their own chits or chits they got from someone else. Specialty items, like jewelry, silver tea services and other luxury goods, there is an auction.”

“So the troopers get nothing?” asked Gregg.

Zach chuckled. “Well, officially, they turn everything in. Remember, they are working for the government and are getting two chits a day. Unofficially, a blind eye is turned if the pilfering is for a special reason or isn’t too obvious. For example, we had a group of troopers who were captured by a reaver gang. They escaped and found the reaver camp, which was loaded with loot. One of the troopers picked up a dress for his sister, everybody knew it, but it was ignored. However, if he had kept a trunk of dresses, he would have been brought before the J.P. for looting.”

“Yeah, but how do you know looting versus taking for something special?” asked Cathy, who had joined them.



“We figure that if you ask your superior, then he or she can tell you. You can take it all the way to the J.P., if you want. However, his word is final. And, there really hasn’t been too many times that a request has been refused. Just use common sense and don’t try to hide something.”

Daniel grinned and asked, “Couldn’t a troop just scavenging on their weeks off?”

Zach laughed. “What weeks off? When not on active duty, you will have to find something you want to learn and become an apprentice. When you pass your apprenticeship, you can set yourself up in business. Believe me, your one or two chits a day won’t keep body and soul together. You had better find something else to do. If you don’t want to apprentice and, say, just want to hunt or farm, how much time will you have to wander around on scavenger hunts?

”Plus, as a trooper, you had better be around and ready to assemble in an emergency. The only time you can be away from the general area is when you are on assignment or have permission from your leader to be gone for a set time.”

Daniel nodded with a chagrined look on his face.

“Where will the boys have to serve?” asked Cathy.

“Here, in Mitchell, unless there is a pressing need somewhere else or they volunteer. We have four troops here and are building a fifth. We usually have half a troop at the Front Gate and a squad at the Back Gate. The other squad is at The Barracks and they rotate during a week. The other day we had some visitors, so we activated another squad for The Barracks, had the duty troops at the Front Gate and militia or Auxiliaries at the Back Gate. So, you will serve once every month on duty.”

“What if we don’t want to serve?” asked Daniel.

“Then you are on your own.”

They went on to discuss where the family wanted to locate. Leo indicated that the upper meadow where they met would be ideal. There was plenty of timber for a house, with good drainage for a septic system. Enough room to plant a good sized garden, hunting and fish in the lake. Leo had a passion for fishing and was looking forward to the mountain trout.

Even though it was over a narrow trail and more than a few hours from The Ranch and Mitchell, it suited them. They wanted to be near people, but not too near, at least at first. Zach rode in with the Appletons to get them registered and have the doctor check them up and see what he could do for Cathy’s arthritis.

Daniel was assigned to One Troop, Jason to First Rangers and Gregg to Third Rangers. Carl spoke with Leo, at length, and found that he had been a combat medic and had hunted all his life. They talked about what kind of skills a ranger would need. Leo, who had served most of his time with the U.S. Rangers, had some good points to make. By the end of the conversation, Leo was appointed to Ranger training and agreed to set up a camp near the lake.

Matt’s troop was in on duty that week and Daniel was to stay at The Barracks with Carl so he could assess his skills. The rest of the family visited the Commissary and met William Smith.

When William found out that they were to join the Mitchell family, he welcomed them. He gave them a hundred government chits towards getting them set up and building their home. He promised to call for a house raising when they were ready. He let Cathy pick out seeds for her garden and a milk cow from the herd.

“Zach, probably told you, but you will also be able to draw another hundred chits since you won’t be occupying any of the empty houses in Mitchell. After that, it’s pay-as-you-go.

“The Commissary will buy fresh, smoked or canned fish and venison. Smoked fowl is fine, but bring back live birds, otherwise. We’ll take fresh or canned produce, but I imagine that you will be using all that you raise, with three growing sons and all.”

William winked at the boys, his white teeth showing bright against his round black face and said, “Especially, the grandkids when they start showing up. If you want to stay free, boys, stay away from Sarah Banducci and her merry band of Matchmakers.”

The boys were embarrassed by the laughter and immediately went looking among the offered goods. The crowd around William noticed, however, that their browsing was in the direction of a group of girls looking at some bolts of cloth.

While the Appletons shopped, Zach excused himself. He promised to be back in an hour and left for the school. He found Grace O’Malley between classes and he asked for a moment of her time.

Typically, she looked at the watch pinned to her blouse and answered that she had five minutes and led him to her office. Zach had a fleeting memory of his younger years at school when he spent a lot of time in the principal’s office. It had the same smell of books and paper.

Grace and Zach sat and he explained about the Appletons and their setting up residence at the lake above The Ranch. He also told her that Leo was, tentatively in charge of Ranger training and it would be done at a camp on his land.

The mayor looked at her watch, impatiently. “I will be happy to welcome them, Zach, but, really I do have a class starting.”

“Grace, what I would like to have is the support of the Council to improve the road to their place, since it will also be used by the rangers. To build and maintain the camp, we will

need to get wagons or, at worse, pack horses over the road safely. As it is, there are spots where it is impossible to get a wagon and dangerous for a fully packed horse or mule.”

Grace agreed to send Pete Lincoln and Greg Borneman to survey the road and make recommendations to the Council. Zach thanked her and left.

That evening, before dinner, Karl took Jason and Gregg aside to assess their training. They fought hand-to-hand and with sheathed knives. These knives, known as Arkansas Toothpicks were given in exchange for a load of weapons to the new Arkansas settlement. They were straight, pointed blades of fifteen inches. The rangers had been armed with them and Charlie Wright, the blacksmith, had copied them. They were designed for throwing or slashing and were worn in a scabbard on a ranger’s back. Karl like them because they were heavy enough to chop wood and made the carrying of an axe as well as a knife unnecessary.

He did not expect the boys to show any facility with the blades, but he gave the boys some tips on how to use them in combat and the techniques for throwing them. Next he took Jason and Gregg to the shooting range. Zach and Karl had set up the range to keep them in practice. It backed up on a small hill and had straw bales to hold the targets. After a few magazines from the new M-34s the boys had been issued, Karl declared that there was no need to worry about their shooting.

Zach had brought his sniper rifle and Jason and Gregg fired several rounds each, hitting the target dead center each time. They returned to the house and the weapons were cleaned and they were called in to eat.

After the survey of the road, Pete and Greg led a team to widen the trail. They worked on it for almost a month, widening stretches and replacing an old Department of Parks bridge. By the time the road was finished, Leo, Zach, Karl and Eduardo had cleared the building site.

Originally, they had planned one big house, but they changed their minds when Daniel announced that he was getting married. Instead, they decided on four separate houses arranged in a square with a common courtyard. The northwest and southeast corners had common walls between two houses and there was a lane between the northeast and southwest corners. Overall, it looked like two 'L's facing in opposite directions and not quite touching.

Cathy Appleton stayed at The Ranch while the work was being done on the site. William, true to his word, made an announcement identifying the day the houses were to be raised. Loads of supplies had been hauled there in anticipation.

The meadow became a tent city as citizens of Mitchell, Big Valley and the rest of the surrounding communities arrived. They went to work early the next morning. The foundations had already been poured and the construction went along without a hitch. By noon the framing was done and by dark only the plumbing, wiring and finish work was left. The masons used stone from the road widening to build the six fireplaces and flag the courtyard.

Three troops had been called to active duty, because so many militiamen were at the building site. Second and Fourth Rangers were on long-range scouts beyond the Mound and the Back Door. The workers sat down to a community dinner, weary but happy with what they had accomplished. The next day, after breakfast, the crowd broke up to return to their homes. Leo and his sons thanked everyone for their help.

The Ranch gave Leo, Daniel, Jason and Gregg each a horse and a light wagon and a horse to Cathy as housewarming gifts. Others chipped in with chits, farming equipment, decorations, fixtures and a host of other household goods.

The next day, Leo asked Zach for the loan of pack horses so he and the boys could return to their cabin above Steamboat Springs and retrieve their belongings. He wanted to start as soon

as the plumbing and wiring was done and they had the inside walls finished in the main house and the one in which Daniel would be living.

Zach got out his maps and they went over them. “Your best route looks to be Colorado 14 from the Pasture, through the Back Door to Hebron. Then, take Rural Colorado Route 38, I think that’s what RCR stands for, to Steamboat Springs.

“We haven’t sent a patrol over there in six months or so. The Council keeps talking of cutting it, but it’s the only complete route west to Salt Lake City. The Colorado 14/US 40 route has a couple of bridges down.”

Studying the map, Leo picked out their route to Mitchell. It was through the mountains with no roads. Karl and Zach were amazed that they had made it at all. Leo admitted that there were some bad spots, but they managed with no wagon and only the one horse.

He agreed that the proposed route looked much better and they could take three trucks and get everything in one load. Zach suggested that he take one of the Ranger Troops and make a training mission of it. That way, they would have help in case of trouble and load the trucks and the troop could get some practical training at the same time.

Carl agreed to let First Rangers accompany the Appletons. They would finish the houses in a couple of weeks and leave immediately after.

Daniel went to his father and asked if they could wait another week so the bans could be officially read and he and Ashleigh Parker could be married before they left.

“Just keep it in your pants,” Leo said. “We’ll only be gone for a couple of weeks. You can get married as soon as we get back.”

When Daniel explained that Ashleigh was pregnant and he wanted to make sure that the baby had his name in case something happened, Leo insisted on seeing Ashleigh’s parents and

getting their say in the matter. The Parkers, a religious clan, were not happy about the situation, but agreed that the wedding should be held as soon as possible.

Daniel was forced to endure considerable ribbing from his brothers during the reading of the bans, but the wedding was held at the church with Father Tilford presiding. Leo had been raised Catholic, but had parted with the church and wanted Zach to perform the marriage, but the Parkers insisted and got their way.

The bride and groom spent one night at the hotel. The next morning the rangers and trucks set out for Steamboat Springs. Ashleigh moved to The Ranch to get to know her mother-in-law. Her twin cousins, Mary and Peggy rode out often to visit.

Karl and Eduardo helped Gregg, who had stayed behind as part of Third Rangers, to finish the houses. The inside walls were of varying widths of half-inch pine. There wasn't enough sheetrock to do the job. The three girls came up to look at the progress and to measure for the curtains. By the time Leo returned, Gregg had announced that he was getting married to Peggy and Mary.

His mother adamantly opposed it. She insisted that he was too young. Leo asked, upon hearing the news, if either or both of the girls were pregnant. Gregg blushed a bright red and answered no. Zach commented that the Appleton boys were sure decimating the Parker girls.

The Parker's asked the same question as Leo, much to the girls' embarrassment. The bans were read the next week and the wedding was held a month later. Jason was told that there were no Parkers left and he would have to wait for one of the young ones to grow up.

## Chapter 11

### Trips South

*Fall 2048*

*That Leo is a kick. Crossing the Rockies with a wife who has a bad case of arthritis. Sneaking around the ranch and listening at the windows. Taking care of William. And all like it was nothing. As Sarah says, he is earthy. And Cathy rules that family with an iron hand. Sarah says that in her talks with Cathy, she says that he does the things that she organizes.*

*I'm not sure that she wanted the boys to marry and leave home. From what Leo says, she will have the empty nest syndrome bad. However, now that they are all living together, things should be all right.*

*That Daniel, what a lothario. Ashleigh Parker has had boys hanging around her since she was twelve. Her dad has had to beat them off with a stick. She plays one against the other, sometimes bringing the situation to blows, but doesn't want any of them. Here comes Daniel with a hello and a smile and they are reading the bans in a month. And smart, too. He suggested a few tweaks in our chit system to make it run a little smoother.*

*Gregg, though, surprised everyone. While Cathy was watching Jason to make sure that he wasn't courting, there was Gregg playing 'slap and tickle' with Ashleigh's cousins. And they had their own string of boys. Well, I have to admit, I made up the 'slap and tickle' part. When he announced that he was going to marry the twins, the first thing everyone thought was, like Daniel and Ashleigh, he had gotten them in the family way, so to speak. I thought he was going to set the curtains on fire, he was blushing so hard. And Cathy, she tried to forbid it, but he looked her in the eye and calmly told her that they would move to Taos, if that was her attitude.*



*Then he turned to me and asked me to marry them. I said yes, of course, and got The Look (that glare that all wives, except Sarah, of course, develops).*

*I explained to Leo about how we thought of consenting adults and marriage. He went in to talk to Cathy and she told him that they were too young and that she was opposing the bans. As gently as I could, I explained that couples a lot younger than Gregg and the twins were allowed to be married and that I would not stand in the way on grounds of the ages of the three of them. Sarah took her aside and the ladies of the ranch all talked to her. Finally, realizing that all she would do was alienate her youngest she gave up the fight.*

*The Parker clan was pretty hot about the whole thing, too. They are very religious and they looked at having three of their girls living above the ranch as the next step up from marrying into a family of heathen cannibals. I found that pretty funny because the Appletons are probably more religious than the Parkers. Leo and family have Bible readings and study on Sundays in place of church services. Leo says that God didn't say go to church, but believe in Jesus. Not being a Biblical scholar, I am not about to argue with him.*

*Anyway, it all turned out. Everybody got married and I suppose kids are on the way. I told Leo that, the way things were going, he was going to have to put another story on the houses before long. He just laughed and said he hoped so.*

*Raphael reported more trouble with the reavers. The attempts of small bands to escape the turmoil had an air of desperation. These small bands, which before had been able to stay out of the way of the warring bands, were being actively hunted. The ones that did not join one of the larger bands were being destroyed. Raphael's spies could not figure out what the motive was for this viciousness.*

*Additional refugees from the Caliphate passed through and were funneled to the Texans who sent for the Florida Muslims. Those had found Florida virtually empty. The few people they did find reported that the plague had swept through again, soon after the Israelis left. The new refugees spoke of murders and factional fighting in the Caliphate. The three claimants had formed a Council to rule. Zach knew from history that this would fall apart and a civil war was inevitable.*

*“Looks like the reavers are killing each other off and the Mahdists will soon be. Hopefully, after all is said and done, we can have some peace,” Zach told Carl one day.*

*“Don’t count on it. Back of the Mahdists are the New Africans and who knows who is back of the reavers. I’m worried that we have had no news from the east. It’s been almost ten years since the bombs and still nothing, unless you count General March and we really don’t know if he came out of the east like he said.”*

*The Aztecs had been quiet. There had been an attack in California which pushed the Bear Flag Republic troops back to a line north of Bakersfield. Nothing had happened at Taos and the new settlement was thriving.*

*They had established some trade with the Navajos, who called themselves the Pueblos.*

*The Texans had lost several patrols sent into Louisiana and were concerned that no refugees had come out nor had any more reaver bands. They wanted to know if Palo Duro could join them in sending in a larger force, but Jasper Poole had politely refused. He did send a ranger troop to help patrol the border for a month, but suggested that they just hold their troops back from the border and not send any more troops in. Jeremiah Hopkins reluctantly agreed.*

*The Mormons reported more refugees from Canada were moving south to avoid another winter. There had been some friction, but nothing serious. A group of Jews was funneled south*

*to Cuba. Fortunately, not at the same time as the Muslims. The Israelis brought trade goods in the ships that were sent for. They had cleared a great deal of the western end of the island of the wild dogs and wanted cattle and sheep and trained herd dogs. Palo Duro provided the animals and a load of other trade goods the Israelis indicated they needed. They reported that nothing more had been heard of the Bolivians.*

About this time an invitation came from Ishtar Singh inviting Zach and Karl to his wedding. It was to be held in September on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Sarah encouraged him to go, but Zach refused unless Sarah agreed to come. She hesitated, but finally assented after Anne, Kay and Mary promised to help Lizzie with the children. They decided to take William and Charlie with them. They were old enough to enjoy the trip and it would relieve the pressure on the caregivers. Baby Karl would also go since he was still nursing.

Karl decided to take the whole family. Brandon and David were old enough and Harriet would not leave the twins. John Singleton provided a large van that he had just converted. It was an old church bus that had belonged to The United Methodist Congregation. It had seating for fourteen. They had discovered it in a ditch outside of Sheridan, WY. They never knew why it had been abandoned, but the gas tank was full and it was brought back to Mitchell.

The boys spent the rest of the summer packing and repacking. Even though they were told that the trip was over a month away, everyone kept tripping over the bag Charlie kept near the back door until, finally, Zach insisted that the bag be put in Charlie's room and out of the way.

William and Charles were sitting in the van when the rest of the family sat down for breakfast. They had prepared their own, as the hacked bread and the open preserve jar gave proof. As the men had finished packing the van and the roof rack, Eduardo quipped, "You have

more equipment than a large expedition. There was a general agreement that kids needed more stuff than any three troopers.

Zach, who hated to sit around saying good-bye, paced while Sarah gave last minute instructions and kissed the smaller children good-bye, again. He finally herded everyone into the van and they set off. He had forgotten the trips with his daughter all those years ago.

Charlie had to go to the bathroom before they got to Mitchell. Brandon said he felt sick and he was moved to the front seat before they reached the Mound. Little Zach filled his diaper and they had to stop and change him and air out the van.

Taking turns driving, they reached Trinidad the first day and decided to call it quits before someone got killed. Whenever anyone asked ‘how much farther’ or ‘how many more minutes’, Zach would reply ‘one mile’ or ‘one hour’.

After the standard question and answer, David said, “You said that last time, Uncle Zach.”

“And I will say it next time, too,” replied Zach. “We will get there when we arrive. Don’t keep asking and I won’t keep lying.”

William asked his mother, but she was not going to get caught up in that game and told him to ask his father.

When they pulled up in front of the hotel in New Trinidad, they all chorused, “How much farther?”

Zach called back, “A mile.”

The piled out and got rooms and unloaded their overnight bags from the van to their rooms and went out for dinner. The restaurant was crowded, but they managed to find a couple of tables to put together in a back corner so as to disturb as few other diners as possible.

The meal was the usual chaos, though there was a minimum of noise. Zach and Karl had laid down firm rules of deportment and the children knew better than to test their parents when things were expressed in that fashion.

Zach and Karl paid with Mitchell government chits and they left the next morning at sunup. The children slept for the first couple of hours and they stopped for breakfast. They had donuts; cold milk from the van's built in cooler and a form of Musli which the cooks at Trinidad had developed. While Sarah and Harriet fed the babies, Zach and Karl took the other children behind some rocks, dug a latrine, used it and covered the small trench.

They pushed on and arrived by the early afternoon. They had met a squad several miles out on the cap rock. People came out to stare and Karl got out of the van and stood on the running board with a book in his hand and shouted, "Praise the Lord, friends. There will be a tent meeting in the pasture tonight. Bring the wives and kids and be careful you don't step in anything."

There was general laughter and Jasper Poole came out of his office to welcome them to town. They unloaded everything from the van and into their rooms. Sarah and Harriet decided to feed the babies and lie down. Zach and Karl took the boys and went visiting. Brandon was paired with William and David with Charlie. They spent the afternoon renewing acquaintances and looking at the changes since the last time they had been in town. They gave David permission to take the boys to the park and play.

They met William Daniels to talk about the military situation with the Aztecs and the reavers coming out of Louisiana. "The Aztecs have been quiet. We are doing a fair amount of trade, which reminds me, I have twenty pounds of green coffee beans for you at the commissary. Anyway, they pretty much ignored the whole Albuquerque thing.

“I do have bad news for you about the rest of the slaves you said were at the plantations. Morales sent a note last week. He said they had been killed in revenge for the death of Alfonso. I would have radioed it, but I knew you were coming down here anyway and, well, with the Questa folks so hot-headed, I just thought you would want to know first and handle it in your own way.”

Zach and Karl were not surprised at the news and decided to send a note to Gail O'Malley and Carl Smythe by the next northbound caravan or courier. That way, they could have a plan of action in place before the Questa people found out about it and did something stupid.

The Louisiana situation was puzzling. Did the reavers have such a stranglehold on the area that no refugees got out or was the population so decimated that there were no one left. The few reavers that had been captured had died rather than be questioned. It surprised the visitors to learn that they had poisoned themselves first.

“That means a strict level of control and a fanatical loyalty. At his best, March didn't have the power to get his men to kill themselves rather than talk. There is someone or something weird going on here,” said Karl.

“There's worse,” said William Daniels. “The Texas patrol that was captured? Every man was crucified. Crucified and gutted. It wasn't a pretty sight, they tell me. The Texans took the men down and burned the crosses. The next time they were past there, the crosses were back. And it wasn't the Christ cross, it was an X.”

“That's the St. Andrew's Cross, I think,” said Zach. “Maybe it was just easier or more stable? I wonder if it is a religious thing or just to terrorize or warn?”

“What about the Rangers from here? Did they see anything?”

Daniels shook his head. "They were on patrol at the border. They were ordered not to cross the boundary the crosses defined and they didn't.

"Let me tell you, the Texans are real nervous about this. They have beefed up their patrols and our rangers did a little training while they were there."

"Well," said Zach. "We have a new man up in Mitchell. A guy named Leo Appleton. He is one of the best woodsmen we have. He's like a ghost and was a medic with the U.S. Rangers. He's training our boys, now."

Zach smiled and said, "I'll see if his wife will let him come down here and do a little training of your boys or the Texan's."

"His wife?" asked William.

"You would have to be there and I'm only half kidding."

They picked up the boys at the park and returned to the Hotel to take Sarah, Harriet and the babies to dinner. They let the children play games on their computer blocks, if they did it quietly and put David in charge. Karl took him aside and gave him a short-ranged signaler. Karl strapped the receiver around his own wrist and told him to press it only in an emergency. The signaler sent a low-power, short-distance burst to the receiver which sent a vibration to the wearer. They had found a case of them in the secret installation at the strip-mine. Zach had liberated several sets.

The adults walked to the bar in the hotel and sat down for a drink and some adult conversation. The women were appalled by the savagery of the crucifixions and Sarah immediately asked Zach if they had asked him to investigate.

He had to repeatedly reassure her that they had not and Karl had to back him up.

The wedding was held the next day. The Visitor's Center had been turned into a Gudwara, the Sikh temple. Everyone removed their shoes upon entering and the men and boys were given a round hat to cover their heads.

Sarah read a small brochure prepared by the Sikh's. The ceremony was called 'Anand Karaj' meaning 'Blissful Union'. She had been warned that she would need a scarf to cover her head and should wear something long-sleeved or a covering for bare shoulders and arms.

They arrived at around 11:00 am to find the groom's party and the bride's party had already been at the temple for three hours for introductions, the exchange of gifts and a tea ceremony. Ishtar Singh wore traditional shirt and trousers and a dark pink turban and carried a dark pink scarf. The bride wore a colorful blouse and pants and a gold embroidered scarf on her head.

There were no chairs and Zach steered his group towards the back, where he could leave if the kids got restless. They sat on the floor and Sarah whispered that they would be sitting like this for forty-five minutes or so. Zach rolled his eyes, knowing perfectly well that the young boys would never sit still that long.

A group of singers were at the front of the hall where the altar of a Christian church would be. There was a priest and the wedding party in front of them. The Guru made a short statement, which Sarah said was the timetable of the ceremony. The wedding party stood straight and said a prayer, which Sarah read was called the Ardas.

Next, the bride's father took the end of the scarf that Ishtar Singh carried and gave it to the bride. A prayer was read, and then sung, the bride and groom walked around the Guru. This was repeated four times, at intervals. The boys were getting restless by the time this was completed.



Just as Zach was about to take the boys out, the whole congregation stood. There was a lot of surreptitious stretching when they stood. A prayer was said. The parents and several members of the congregation blessed the bride and groom and gave them small gifts.

The congregation reseated itself and attendants moved through the crowd and gave each one a small bowl of a sweet pudding. The boys cleaned their bowls to the last bit, but Zach found it too sweet for his taste, though he ate it. Sarah whispered that, usually, there were no bowls and you take the pudding in your hand. Ishtar Singh insisted on the small bowls, which he had made, because of all the western guests.

As Zach started to place his bowl on a nearby table with the small round hat that he removed from his head, Sarah stopped him. “The brochure says to keep the bowls, Zach. The names of the bride and groom are painted on the side.”

Zach collected the bowls from William and Charlie and carried them back to the hotel. They changed their clothes and went to the restaurant for lunch. There was a group playing Sikh music and Ishtar Singh and his bride greeted their guests.

“Zach, my friend. Welcome, welcome. These are your sturdy sons,” he said taking the boys by the shoulders. “And your beautiful wife. It is truly a blessed day.”

He introduced his bride, a small woman who smiled shyly at them. Zach put his wrapped package on the gift table and they found a place with Karl and his family at a table. Lunch was provided and it had all the aspects of every other wedding reception he had attended, with the exception of the exotic music and food.

The food came and came. Each dish was different and more delicious than the last. Karl leaned over and said, “The brochure should have said to eat small portions. I think I’m going to bust.”

Zach nodded towards the boys who were cramming food into their mouths. Karl rolled his eyes and said something about late night stomach aches.

The day ended with the bride leaving her parents house, though she had been married before and had a home of her own. It was a touching ceremony. After it was over, a dinner was held with wine and more food. Zach helped Sarah put the children down and then put in a short appearance.

He met the bride's children, a large young man of nineteen and a delicate girl of thirteen. They both spoke glowingly of their new father and how happy he would make his mother. Zach made a toast to the new bride and groom and had a few drinks with Ishtar Singh. He left Karl drinking and dancing and went to bed a little unsteady on his feet.

Zach spent the next day inspecting the new security system the settlement had installed. It consisted of several dozen cameras scattered around the settlement. They were fed to a wireless receiver and a bank of screens. The cameras were powered by micro solar cells.

Ishtar Singh and William Daniels were showing him and Karl around. The communications room had auto monitors for the screens. These would sound a small alarm when a moving body passed in front of a camera. The camera would then track the movement until redirected or the movement ceases for five-minutes. The moving body had to have an infra-red signature and be of a certain size before the alarm sounded.

"Where did you get something like this?" asked Zach.

The two Palo Durans laughed. "We had much luck, Zach," boomed Ishtar Singh. His voice reverberated off the cement walls of the room. Daniels suggested they step outside in order not to disturb the three operators.

The Sikh continued, “We sent a patrol towards Cimarron to look around. It was part of our normal scouting and training cycle. The Ninth Rangers were to approach Cimarron without being detected. They approached Las Mesas del Conjelson or whatever. They were going to wait for night. The sentry climbed higher on the mesa and stumbled on a trail. He reported it and the troop leader sent men to investigate.

“When they came to the upper end of the trail, they found a door. A very strong door. The door was strong, but a small charge of powder in the lock was stronger. Behind the door was a cave and in the cave was a room with a few skeletons, some weapons, this equipment and a very large amount of drugs.”

“Is this where you got all the heroin, cocaine and pills you sent to the docs?” asked Karl.

“Of course,” returned Ishtar Singh. “It was a storehouse. We buried the skeletons, sent the weapons, or most of them to the Texans, sent the useful drugs to Mitchell for distribution, destroyed the bad drugs and used their surveillance system for us.”

“Bad drugs?” asked Zach.

“Crystal Meth, Ecstasy, Granite and others I and the Doctor couldn’t identify,” answered William.

”The smugglers had a very fine system, fine system, and a very extensive set of tunnels. The mesa was a honeycomb of passageways and bolt holes. We also got a lot of C-4 they had rigged to blow the place,” Daniels continued.

“This is how we knew you were coming,” Ishtar Singh said. “We saw you many miles before you came near.”

Zach got the serial and model numbers from the equipment and said that the salvage parties would be looking for this kind of technology from that point on. William laughed and told them to look along the smuggler trails.

By the time they arrived at Trinidad, Sarah had visibly relaxed. Zach continually asked her ‘what the matter was’ with no answer. She admitted that night that she was worried that Zach would go to Louisiana to investigate the mystery. He laughed and held her and replied that that was not a job for him.

“It needs a ghost in the woods. Someone like Leo and his boys. Nope, I am not up to this one, so you’re stuck with me.

“Maybe you should go and get yourself killed,” she retorted. “It would give me some peace and quiet.”

## Chapter 12

### Ranger Training and the Long Scout

*Fall/Winter 2048/2049*

*The wedding was beautiful. Ishtar Singh has got himself a prize. I have to admit that the family needed a vacation; though traveling with the mob was an eye-opener.*

*Fortunately, I remembered the 'how many more miles' answer that my father gave me when I was a kid. I never had to use it before, funny. I hadn't realized how tense Sarah was until after we got back. It was like she had built up all of this tension from being with the kids and stuck on the Ranch. I realize now that the quilting and matchmaking was her form of release and I hope I have more understanding and tolerance in the future.*

The morning after they got home, Zach called Carl and they had a long conversation. After he hung up, he and Karl saddled up and rode to the high meadow to see Leo. They rode to the house and the girls, who were working in the garden, met them at the gate.

"How's things?" asked Zach. "Miss the excitement of the city lights?"

"You know, Mr. Banducci, we thought we would," answered Ashleigh, "but we really don't. It's so peaceful here."

Peggy muttered something that Zach couldn't hear. "Excuse me?" he asked.

The girl turned red and said 'nothing' and hurried back to the garden.

"Don't pay her any mind," said Mary. "Mrs. Appleton has gotten under her skin."

"Ah," said Zach, thinking he understood.

Ashleigh walked them to the house. "She's really very nice, you know," she said. "Mrs. Appleton, I mean, Cathy, is just used to running things."

Zach put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a hug. “Basic rule? When she is in your house, you are the boss. When you are in her house, she is. Make that understood and you are more than half-way home. That’s what my father told me when my mother got that way.”

Ashleigh gave him a brilliant smile and hurried back to the garden.

“Think it will work?” asked Karl with a grin.

“Not until I tell Leo and have him have a talk with Cathy, no,” replied Zach.

Cathy came to the door drying her hands and greeted them with a wide smile. They made small talk for a few minutes. She told them that Leo was out fishing at the other end of the lake.

She pointed to a tall pine whose branches had been stripped off half way up the trunk. “Run the flag to the top and he’ll be back.”

Puzzled, the two men walked over to the tree and found that there was a lanyard and a white flag on a bench built around the tree. Karl grabbed the rope and ran the flag to the pulley and they sat on the bench.

A half hour later they saw an old rowboat moving towards shore, propelled by Leo. He pulled up to the new dock and tied the boat. They helped him lift a large cooler from the boat. He greeted them and showed them his catch. The cooler was nearly full of fish.

“Not bad, huh?” he asked. “Saw the flag. Stay for supper. We’re going to batter fry some of these and I’ll freeze the rest and take them to the commissary.”

He helped with his equipment and they sat on a bench by the front door of his house. He rolled a smoke and said in a low voice, “I used to drink, smoke and have sex. Cathy gave me a choice between drinking and marriage, so I quit drinking. Been married for almost twenty-five years, so there goes the sex.” He lifted the rolled cigarette and applied a tongue to the paper. “This is the only vice I have left.”

He lit the cigarette and took a deep drag. “What can I do for you boys?”

Zach explained the problem the Texans were facing. They needed to find out what was happening, but did not have anyone that could do the job. He explained about the crucified men and the implied threat of the new crucifixes.

“So, you want me to go in there and look things over? Sorry, boys, my back won’t take it. I start sleeping on the ground and I need a crane to get me up. Anyone going in won’t be taking a camp cot with them.”

“Do you have any suggestions, then?” asked Karl.

“Daniel’s good, but not good enough for this. Gregg is a little green, though I think he’ll turn out to be the best of them. No, you’ll want Jason.

“Karl, you have him practicing with that knife every day. Pretty soon he’ll be sticking flies on the wing at sixty yards. And he’s good in the woods and on the plains.

“But, this isn’t a job for one. Something as dicey as this should have two. Adam Silver would be my next choice. A good knifeman and quick. He’s good with a gun and the two of them can run all day.

“Neither of them are squeamish, either. They know when to cut a throat and when not to. Yep, those two are my recommendation.”

The three men spoke for a while longer, Zach and Karl helping to clean the fish into a bucket. When they were finished, Leo led the way to a standpipe and they washed the blood and scales off their hands and cleaned their knives.

“Will they do it?” Zach asked.

“You tell those two you want them to head into enemy territory and they will be in hog heaven.”

He wrapped up a dozen fish and put them in a burlap sack. They shook hands and mounted up. As they road away, they waved to the girls hoeing the truck garden.

Zach dropped off the fish to Sarah and went in to call Carl. He told him of the talk he had with Leo and what he had said. He came back out and told Sarah that he had to go to town and talk with Carl in the morning.

While she was preparing dinner, he explained the operation.

“Why not just ignore them and keep the border guarded,” she asked.

“These aren’t normal reavers, Sarah. They is something spooky about them. They sent a couple of small bands out to test the Texans. When they were caught, they killed themselves. They are more dedicated than a self-centered reaver would be. This is a new breed and we need to find out more about them.”

“Well, as long as you are not going in,” she said, waving a paring knife threateningly at him.

“If Leo says that most of the rangers he is training can’t do it, what makes you think an old, fat man like me can?” Zach replied.

“Now, dear,” Sarah said sweetly, “you’re not fat.”

Lizzie, who was peeling potatoes, giggled. Zach glared at her and threatened, “Think that’s funny? Wait till I marry you off to an old man with bad breath.” Lizzie giggled again as he walked out of the room.

The next morning, Zach and Karl rode into town to meet with Carl and the War Council. They found them already assembled at The Barracks. Carl briefly explained the situation facing the Texans. “They are spending a lot of resources on their eastern border. With the loss of two of their troops, they are spread a little thin and are having a hard time maintaining a patrol



against our reavers and the Louisiana ones, too. Palo Duro needs to keep her troops at home because of the Aztecs. Trinidad is in a vulnerable position and should have more than the two troops they have. Gunnison has plenty of troops, but is too far away to be sending troops in on a rotating basis.”

Wendall Freeman raised his hand and, after he was recognized, said, “I always thought Gunnison has too many troops. There they are, stuck way up in them mountains and they have, what, four troops, one ranger troop and the troop of tanks. I suggest that we take one of their troops and make it a Trinidad troop and then temporarily assign it to the Texans.”

Carl agreed, but knew how well that would go over. He said as much and Karl asked him who was in charge of defense and the troops. The rest of the Council agreed with Karl.

Carl walked over to the roster board and began counting the unmarried troops at Gunnison. “Thirty-nine,” said Wendall, when he saw what Carl was doing.

Smythe turned from the list and nodded, “All right, we pull one troop out of Gunnison and reassign it to Trinidad. Then we send it to help the Texans. With the understanding, it is a defensive force only.”

Zach then stood and went into further detail about the plan to send in two rangers to discover what kind of reavers they were dealing with in Louisiana. He gave them Leo’s recommendations and asked them to approve the mission.

After a few desultory questions, the package of a troop and two detached rangers to Texas was approved. Carl left them to let Ed Black know what had been decided and to have him find volunteers, if he could or assign single men to the new Trinidad troop and get them started for Lake Texana.

Zach followed Carl to his office and was nodded into a chair as Carl turned to the phone. The Singletons had managed to connect to a couple of satellites and to repair a cell tower. When the satellites were overhead and the atmospheric conditions were right, there was a connection to Gunnison or Palo Duro. Today Carl was lucky and managed to get the connection and catch Ed Black in his office. Due to the tenuousness of the connection, Carl cut the civilities short. He explained the need for a troop at the Texas/Louisiana border and his decision to transfer a troop from Gunnison and send the troop to Texas to assist the Texans.

Surprisingly, Ed did not protest the move. He admitted that it was the smartest course and he had advocated that they volunteer a troop move. He had expected it to be a troop to Palo Duro, himself. He promised to get the troop moving in the next two weeks. Carl thanked him and set down the phone with a sigh of relief.

“That was easy,” he said to Zach.

Seeing that his moral support was not needed, Zach went looking for Karl and the two of them returned to The Ranch. They worked for the rest of the week around the ranch. They and Eduardo culled the cattle herd. These cattle were penned in the south pasture to be driven to town the following day.

Some of the cattle were sold to the butchers and the rest to the Commissary. After picking up a few things, the three men rode back to The Ranch. Sarah met them on the porch and told Karl and Zach that Leo wanted to see them, if they had time. Eduardo said he could handle anything that came up. Sarah had decided to visit Cathy and the girls, if Zach and Karl went and she had already gathered her things. Charlie and William wanted to go, too. By the time they got their mounts ready, David and Brandon heard about it and they asked if they could go along.

The small caravan finally got going and they reached the Appletons' place by midday. Cathy and the girls welcomed Sarah. She told Zach and Karl that Leo was at the ranger training camp. The boys took their fishing poles to the dock. The women seated themselves at the table by the lake where they could watch the boys.

Karl and Zach rode to the training camp. Leo and Samuel Ling greeted them when they arrived. Leo rolled a cigarette and said, "Thought you might like to see the first graduation from the Appleton School of Hard Knocks.

"The First Rangers are out there and they are due back today. We borrowed a truck and dropped them off ten days ago, blindfolded, and they have until today to get back."

Karl asked, "What equipment did they have?"

Leo lit his cigarette and grinned. "They each had their knives, a compass and I didn't break their legs."

Zach laughed and said, "Nice of you."

Leo nodded and added, "They do have a personal GPS unit, in case they need help or get lost. However, if the cover is off when they get back, they flunk. The object is to get back here, healthy and safe."

"So this is an individual effort?" asked Karl.

"Kind of. We set them in a sort of pattern where they should come across one or more of the others. We didn't tell them to work together, but we didn't tell them they couldn't. It should be interesting," answered Samuel.

He held up his computer and showed them where each ranger was, based on the rangers GPS. There were six in one group, two in another and two moving individually. One of the single rangers was in the lead and the other was lagging far behind.

“If we had more troops,” said Leo. “We would station a cordon around the camp they had to filter through, but this should give us some idea of what they can do. When we have the leader graduation, I’ll do that.”

“Leader graduation?” said Zach.

“Yeah. To be a ranger, they have to take my course and pass it and do well on this little operation. To be a troop leader, they have to organize an operation, after we give them the objective, and carry it out.”

Karl grinned, “What if they have a ranger who doesn’t like them and tries to sabotage the exercise?”

Leo looked at him from the corner of his eye. “Leadership includes a lot of things beside field operations. But, between you and me, if there is someone who tries to sabotage the thing, they aren’t rangers any more.”

Zach looked intrigued. “What kind of exercise, for instance?”

“Oh, like following a patrol and setting up an ambush. Getting an item guarded by a troop who knows they are coming. Moving from point A to point B and we have a ranger ‘get sick’ en route. I don’t know, I’ll just have to get creative.

“I’m going to insist that Jason and Adam pass the advanced training before I’ll recommend that they be sent to Texas. Is that okay with you?”

“I think that sounds reasonable. How long before we know?”

Leo scratched his head, thinking. “About a month should do it. Say, two months to be in the field in Louisiana?”

The first of the rangers broke through the trees. It was Adam Silver and he carried a bow and had three arrows stuck through his belt. He looked tired, but fit. He walked up to Leo who

checked his GPS unit and had Adam put all of his equipment on a table. There was the bow and arrows, his knife, a compass, some meat wrapped in a deer hide and several pieces of flint. The flint was to make more arrowheads or light a fire, if necessary.

Samuel made a notation in his computer and told the ranger to get cleaned up. Karl took the bow and tested the pull and shot an arrow at a nearby tree. He nodded and replaced the bow.

A couple of hours later, the pair of rangers arrived. They were tired and looked drawn when they reached Leo. Again, he checked their GPS units and their equipment and dismissed them to clean up.

The group of six reached them forty minutes later. Alan Benson was being helped by several others. He had broken his leg in a fall and there was a rough splint on it. Before letting the rest help him to the barracks, he checked their GPS units. Leo sent Ed Wiley to The Ranch to call for the doctor. Jonathon Silver brought out Alan's equipment when they returned.

Jonathon told how they had found Alan's trail and followed it until they found him. He had put the splint on it himself using the green hide of a deer that had dried and shrunk to form a cast. Alan had whittled a rough crutch from a forked branch and was making his way to the camp. The five of them had taken turns helping him. Jonathon and the rest stressed that Alan would have made it back to camp, eventually, by himself.

Leo nodded and checked their equipment and dismissed them.

By the time the last man arrived, the rest of the troop had showered and cleaned up. Jason walked out of the trees with a small deer around his shoulders and two turkeys in his left hand. He dropped the turkeys and swung the deer into the hands of his fellow rangers. Leo checked his GPS and equipment and said, "You're the last man in."

Jason grinned and answered, "I figured I would be. I was following Jon's group for the last few miles. How's Alan?"

"He's fine but how did you know it was Alan?" asked Bill Harkness.

"His tracks. Alan is pigeon-toed and there were only prints of his right foot and the mark of a crutch or stick for the left. Then you guys were carrying him over some of the rough spots."

"Why were you so late?" asked Samuel.

Jason pointed to the deer and turkeys. "I thought we could have a barbecue. We all made it back and I didn't know if you would feed us." He grinned at his father.

"You are absolutely right. I didn't plan on feeding you. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart." He picked up the turkeys and tossed to Jason. "I expect those to be ready for supper tomorrow. Tonight you can butcher the deer and get some steaks ready in two hours. Pots are in the barracks."

"Hey, that's not fair." Jason cried, the smile leaving his face.

Leo rounded on him and looked up at his tallest son. There were several inches difference between them, but it was evident who was in charge. Leo took two steps forward, nearly pinning his son to a nearby tree. He jammed his fists on his hips and said, "You may think this is some kind of a lark. A big joke. But, Jason, it is deadly serious. If you and Adam got into Louisiana with this attitude you are going to come out dead."

"You think that this exercise was a way of showing what a stud you are. You killed a deer and two turkeys with your knife. Good job. Great, but were they hunting you?"

Jason's attitude went from surprised to resentful to ashamed. He hung his head at Leo's harangue. The rest of the boys looked embarrassed for him.

Leo took a deep breath and continued in a milder voice, “As of now, you aren’t going to Louisiana or any other place where you can get yourself and your team killed. You and Adam are going out tomorrow. You will have the same task; get back here. There will be one difference. The rest of the troop will be out to find you.

“The rules are simple. If they find you, if you touch one of them, you are out. No Louisiana, no nothing. You stay in the rangers, but that is the best you can do. The same goes for Adam.”

He turned to the other six rangers. “And to make sure that you don’t let them win, there is a consequence for you. If they get through, you are out of the rangers. The reward is that if you catch them, you go to Louisiana in their place. Let Ed know when he gets back.”

With that he turned on his heel and nodded to Samuel, Zach and Karl to follow him. He led them through the parade ground, calling to Jason, “I want my supper in an hour.”

“You’re not seriously going to kick that other out of the rangers, are you?” asked Zach.

“After I spent so much time training them? But, as long as they think I am, well, that’s going to give them a lot of incentive tomorrow.”

He rolled another cigarette and patted his pockets for matches. When he found the box, it was empty. “We’re going to have to get somebody to make these things,” he said as he searched the drawers of his desk, finally coming on a book from a dance club in Laramie.

They all took seats and Leo said that he would be ready in Louisiana two weeks after the ranger’s test. Jason and Adam would leave if they passed.

Zach was surprised. “What if Jason and Adam don’t win? What if one of the other boys catch them?”

Leo blew out a plume of smoke and said confidently, “They won’t catch those two. If I shook Jason up like I hope I did, then nothing will catch those two. They are like smoke in the woods.”

They talked about the operation in Louisiana until Clemente Ojeda fetched them to eat. They went across the dining hall and had deer steaks, fried potatoes and fresh bread that Peggy had baked that morning.

‘Doc’ White drove up in time for coffee. He checked on Alan’s leg, gave him pills for pain and redressed the leg with an inflatable cast.

Cathy, who had seen him drive up, brought pies that she and the girls had baked. William, Charlie and Brandon raced up to show them how many fish they caught. Sarah trailed along behind like the drag for a cattle drive.

After admiring the boys’ catches, they all sat down for pie.

“I figured that when the doctor showed up, the day’s training was over,” Cathy said. “How did the boys do?”

“Well enough, well enough,” was all Leo would say.

After pie, Alan was loaded into ‘Doc’s car and they started down the hill. Zach and Karl loaded up their families in the wagon and followed them.

On the way back to The Ranch, Sarah said, “Cathy is going to insist that Leo go with the boys to Texas. She wants him close in case something happens.”

Zach shook his head. “What is Leo going to do the boys can’t. He would be the first to admit that he is too old for hide-and-seek with what ever is out there in Louisiana. I’d send Samuel and the rest of the First Rangers, first.”

“Cathy has a lot of faith in Leo. She thinks you should go too.”



“ME?” Zach shouted in surprise, waking the children and nearly spooking the horses. “I am a worse choice than Leo. I’m like a ghost in the woods, too. The ghost of Marley, wrapped up in chains.”

“I told her you would go,” Sarah said with a smile.

“YOU WHAT?” shouted Zach again, prompting Karl to offer to drive.

Zach jokingly told him to shut up and turned back to Sarah. “I thought we had this out. Why would I go? There is no logical reason to have me there. What are you thinking of? And I told you I wasn’t going on any more of these things. I’m staying home, taking care of the ranch, you and the kids, not in that particular order.

“Where would she get the idea that I would be any good in Louisiana?”

“First thing, you won’t be going to Louisiana, you will stay in Texas. And she got the idea from the Parker girls. I didn’t realize that you made such an impression on them. From what they say, you are a cross between Roland and Julius Caesar.

“I really think that Cathy wants you there as, sort of, a good luck charm.”

“That’s me, a white, fuzzy rabbit’s foot,” said Zach sarcastically, causing the others to laugh. “What about you, obviously, you are okay with this?”

“I like Cathy and, as long as you stay in Texas, I think that you should go. You’ve been saying that you need to talk with Raphael and that man from Texas to get firsthand information.”

“Hopkins,” said Zach absently. “You know, you seem so eager to get rid of me that some would think you are having an affair.”

“Maybe it’s so much fun when you get home,” Sarah retorted.

Zach let it drop.

The next morning, Zach was helping Sarah get the children ready for school. As they saw them off, he asked, “All right. What is this all about? This sudden desire to have me in Texas.?”

“Oh. Cathy is worried about what Leo would do if something happened to Jason. The two of you haven’t known each other long, but Cathy feels that you could keep him from doing something rash. She’s afraid that he will go charging off and get himself into trouble.

“She asked me if I would let you go, too.”

“Let me go? Ah, yes you could take the chain off my collar.”

“Oh, stop that. You know what she meant.”

As they were standing in the doorway, Leo drove by in the truck. Half the troop was in the back with Jason and Adam blindfolded. Zach assumed the other half was going to head out from the training barracks and try to head Jason and Adam off.

A week later, Leo rode down to The Ranch. The rest of First Rangers followed him into the yard. Jason and Adam had passed the test with flying colors and the rest of the troop looked dejected. They weren’t worried about being kicked out of the rangers, but the way the two had so easily evaded them.

“Ready to go?” asked Leo.

“No,” said Zach. “I’ve got two more days before I meet you in Mitchell. Don’t get pushy.”

Leo laughed and rode on. Zach came down and shook the hands of Jason and Adam and congratulated them on their success.

Zach finished up his work and met with Karl about the trip. Eduardo walked up and asked, "I would like to go with you, Zach. I want to look over the stallions and bulls in Texas. We could use some new blood in the herds."

"Fine with me, but what about the place? Can John and the boys handle it?"

"Sure. This is a pretty quiet time. We cleaned out the water holes, repaired the fences and hunted down the predators. Anyway, you two guys always get to get out. I'm getting cabin fever."

Karl and Zach laughed. Karl said, "I don't mind. You two go and I'll be the homebody for a change. Harriet will appreciate that. At least, for a while. I was just going along for moral support, anyway."

"I'll spend some time with the troops and do a little hunting and fishing. Between naps I'll even think of you poor boys, working away down in the heat of east Texas."

Eduardo grinned and slapped his big friend on the shoulder. He left to pack his gear and tell Anne he was going.

Zach looked at Karl and said, "We could use a new bull or stallion, you know. And you don't have to stay here, everything's covered. We can get help from the Appleton boys, if necessary."

"I don't mind, really. It will give me a chance to get to know the boys. Do a little male bonding and all. And I can play with the twins and, maybe, add another. I have to work pretty hard to catch up with you, but someone has to do it," Karl said with a martyred air.

"Yeah, I'm sure you'll suffer through it."

Eduardo and Zach rode out the next afternoon to meet Leo in town. They would stay at the hotel and get an early start. The first part of the journey would be with the normal supply

caravan heading for Palo Duro. They would leave the trucks to ride east to Seldon, Kansas to see Raphael, then southeast to meet the leaders of the Arkansas settlements. After that, they would head south to the Lake Texana.

The trip was uneventful. Raphael and Ralph Meeker, the Arkansas leader, reported only a few incursions that were easily stopped. The reports out of the Dead Zone, as they were calling it, were much the same. The refugees reported gang-style warfare. Hit and run raids with no survivors. Occasionally, the Kansans or Arkansawyers would mount a raid of their own, looking for refugees or small bands of reavers.

The settlers in Texas had been hit from Louisiana several times. The pattern of attacks showed they were not probes for weak points. The reavers came in and killed the old or young. The strange thing the Texans noted was that after stripping the buildings of loot, the structures were not burned.

Because the settlements were so far apart, the reavers were able to penetrate beyond the line of settlements and posts, but patrols usually found signs of their passage and they were attacked when they returned with whatever slaves and loot they had gathered. Leo observed that this was reminiscent of the Limes that the Romans had established on the border with the Germanic tribes. "The Germans would cross the line and do some damage, but the Romans usually caught them and slaughtered the raiders. Didn't do much for the victims, but it tended to discourage other Germans."

The physical appearance of the Louisiana reavers was changing, too. They were sporting body tattoos. Fantastic shapes done in blue or black with accents of red. The tattoos depicted dragons, bears, tigers and other predators. They came on a battle site a day after the fight and they saw the body of a man with his face, torso and arms tattooed with tiger stripes.

Eduardo, upon seeing the body, said, “Beautiful artwork, but it would take many hours, painful hours, to have it done. This is no simple gang symbol.”

They rode on to Lake Texana and spoke with the Hopkins. The town of Ganado had grown to a small metropolis. It had become the center for the Texas Republic. Beaumont had become the military center. They were nearest the border and no farmers or ranchers could survive the reaver attacks without a military presence..

“They don’t seem to care, Zach. They know we will track them down and overpower them, but they don’t care,” said John Lamont, the military commander. He was a tall, thin black man with a scar marring his jaw. He had been a border scout near Laredo and had managed to survive on a small farm near Port Arthur. He had been reluctant to join the Texans. He had a wife and three children and they had settled down and were content to let the world pass them by. One day, while he was scavenging, the reavers came. He never told anyone what happened, but he buried his family and rode to Ganado to volunteer. He was merciless and killed any reavers where he found them.

“What do you mean, they don’t care. Don’t they try to hide their trail?”

“No, and they come back the same way they went in. We’ve captured a few, but they have some drug they take and kill themselves. It’s really spooky, man.”

They asked John where the best location was to insert Jason and Adam.

“If you insist on going in, you should try up around Natchitoches. There’s a lot of old government woodland there and it is pretty far north of any consistent incursions. The reservoir has been a moat; they don’t seem to use boats.”

He looked at the map and traced I-10. “This is where how they travel. When they hit the border, they move northwest or west. They haven’t hit the coast, yet, but we expect them to at some point.

“When we put scouts on the border to keep watch for them, the scouts disappear. We don’t even find the bodies, though the heads will be set up on stakes.

“I don’t know,” John said, rubbing the scar on his jaw. “It’s like they are careful and secretive on their side of the border and they go crazy on ours.”

“Do you stop all incursions?” asked Leo.

“No, not by a long shot. We get about one band in ten, but we chase the other nine off. They don’t try to engage our troops, but fight to the last man, if they do. They are savages about civilians. Any civilians are taken, if possible, but are killed if the reavers are pressed. It just doesn’t make sense.

There are no settlements within twenty miles of the border, just posts where troopers are stationed. Soon there won’t be any reason to have the posts and we’ll pull them back. They are hard to supply, this far from the settlements.”

“Maybe, that is what they want,” mused Zach. “

“What do you mean?” asked John.

“Well, if you pull back the troopers guarding the border, then you have opened up a wide swath of territory to the reavers. Let’s say, for argument’s sake that they are trying to push you back. If they wipe out the civilians then they wipe out your reason for being here and you pull out, back to where the settlements have been reestablished.”

“Then they take over?”

“Maybe, maybe not. It depends on what they want to do. If they are looking for territory, then yes, they move their own people in. If they just want a larger buffer between the two of you, then they have established a DMZ to their satisfaction.”

John mused over this. “What if we stay? Keep the forts manned?”

“You run the risk of being surrounded and wiped out. It would be easy to cut your supply lines. They could hit small patrols or your bases, if you send out large patrols. You don’t have enough troops to fully man the posts and send out large patrols.

“However, that is all speculation. Until we get our boys in and out with a report, we are only guessing. I say we insert Jason and Adam and let them scout around. Can you intensify the patrols along the whole border? I would like to keep the reavers occupied so the boys can slip in unnoticed.”

Two days later, before the new moon rose, Leo, Zach, John and the rangers were gathered among the heavy brush at the southern end of the reservoir. Jason and Adam wore dark clothing and had blackened their faces. They each had a large backpack. Inside the packs were their camouflage gear, trail rations and medical supplies. They were armed with two 9mm automatics and had four silencers and a hundred rounds of ammunition each. Their Arkansas toothpicks were strapped to their backs and throwing knives were tucked into waist and ankle sheathes. Each had a bow and twelve arrows with another dozen arrowheads in their belt pouches. Extra bowstrings, matches and canteens finished up their kit. They were to enter the forest on the other side of the river and strike south. In four weeks, whether they had found anything important or not, they were to meet back in Beaumont.

Leo took Jason by the shoulders and said, “Remember what you learned. You aren’t going in there to kill or cause trouble. The best thing would be if they didn’t even know that you were there. Just gather information and get out.

“Come back safe or we won’t be able to go home and face your mother.”

Zach shook their hands and said to them, “Come back safe and we’ll find some spare Parker girls for you, too.”

They grinned and gave them the thumbs up. Suddenly they were gone; the only sign a faint splash and wavelets hitting the shore.

The three men stood there and stared into the darkness, vainly trying to see them. John finally turned away and walked back to the trooper who was holding their mounts. Reluctantly, the other two followed and they rode to Ganado.

Zach knew that the next four weeks would be difficult for Leo.



## Chapter 13

### Jason and Adam

*Winter 2048*

*The boys are off. Leo looks like hell and it's only been two days. Several times he has suggested that we should go after them, but cooler heads prevailed. To give him something to do, John has asked him to conduct a training class for the Texas Rangers (what other name could they use?) He reluctantly agreed and he and the rangers have headed west. They are either going to come back completely confused because Leo is distracted, or beat to a frazzle with the intensity of the training.*

*Eduardo has found several stallions and bulls that he likes. Tomorrow we are going to take a look at them and trade, if they are all he says they are, like I have any doubts.*

*We got some news from Taos. Three of the ex-slaves that headed towards Farmington are back. Juan and Ernesto Delgado found their families and decided to stay unless they could convince them to move to Taos.*

*Oscar Connick and Sandra Barfield found their homes raided and burned to the ground. They buried the bones and decided to return.*

*The best news was from Gary Mahon. His family was still on the ranch. They decided to move, bag and baggage to Taos. They included his and his wife's parents, his wife and their three children. At least there is some good news.*

*Sarah and Anne sent their love and Chris sent a rather lengthy message to Leo. I can imagine what she said. He was pretty glum for the rest of the day. When he gets back, I'm going to suggest that we head for Beaumont. For that matter, we may just ride back and forth from Beaumont to Ganado to keep him busy.*

*I wonder how the boys are doing.*

Jason and Adam stripped at the waters edge and piled their clothes and equipment on two trees that they had spotted. In the faint starlight, they pushed off and let the current carry them downstream while they kicked across to the far bank. The drifted nearly a mile before they reached the shore. The packs and equipment were quickly lifted from the driftwood and carried through the brush into a grove of cottonwoods.

While one watched, the other dressed. They listened to the night sounds, straining to hear something out of the ordinary. All they heard were the rustlings of small, nocturnal animals or the swooping of bats over the water.

They started across the wide meadow, moving from rocks to brush, crouching low to minimize their profiles. The moon rose as they entered the forest of pines. Undergrowth was minimal due to the thick canopy overhead. The rangers moved out, searching for a deer path, stopping often to listen to the night.

They found a large pine that had fallen, taking several smaller trees with it. The trunks formed a small cave. They cut branches from the underside of the trees and wove them to form a roof and a screen for the opening. Other branches they cut and formed beds. They spent the rest of the night huddled in their blankets.

At dawn, Adam and Jason searched their back trail for signs of pursuit or traces they left. There was no one and the thick bed of needles gave no evidence of their passing. They changed into camouflage and set out towards the south. Several times during the morning they heard the sound of far off horns. Each time they froze, but the sounds faded to the east.

At noon they came across a paved, country road. The thick leaves showed that it hadn't been used in some time and the rangers crossed, careful to leave no sign of their passing. On the far side, they found a deer trail and followed it for several miles.

They stopped for lunch, eating more of the trail rations and drinking from a clear, cold stream. An hour later Adam shot a turkey and they quickly gutted and plucked it. They buried the offal in a deep hole they dug with their knives and moved on.

Late in the afternoon they found a spot in the midst of a thick grove of young pines to camp. Over a small fire, they cooked the turkey.

"Not as good as your mom's," Adam said, gnawing on a hunk of breast meat.

"Yeah, but it's better than the trail mix," returned Jason, wiping his hands on his thighs.

After dinner, they smothered the fire and lay on a bed of branches. "What do you think the horns meant, Adam?" asked Jason.

"Beats me. Couldn't be hunters, the noise would scare away the game."

Still thinking about the significance of the horns, the two tired men fell asleep. Jason woke with the sun shining in his eye from a break in the trees. He rose and scouted the area before starting a small blaze. He used powdered eggs to make breakfast, supplementing the mess with bits of turkey from the previous evening and water from a nearby stream. While Adam cleaned the dishes and policed the camp, Jason buried the fire and threw the cut branches into the scant underbrush.

They set out and immediately found a dirt road which showed some signs of travel, though not from the past week or two. Paralleling the road they followed it southeast and came to a forestry camp. There was an office, a barracks and several out buildings. They inspected them with high powered glasses, but saw no movement.

“Notice anything?” asked Adam.

“Nothing except it seems to be deserted,” answered Jason.

“Fresh paint,” said Adam.

Jason looked again and saw that Adam was right. “The windows are boarded up, too,” he observed. “Want to go down there?”

Adam looked at Jason as if the answer was obvious. They circled the buildings, searching for tracks, but found none. When they were back at their starting point, Adam told Jason to keep watch and he started towards the office. Jason nocked an arrow and began to scan the surrounding trees.

Stepping softly, his moccasins making no identifiable mark on the hard ground, Adam advanced and stopped at the side of the door. The coverings over the glass prevented him from seeing inside, but he noticed the door didn’t fit tightly into the frame. Using a pliable piece of plastic, as Karl had shown the rangers in his ‘Breaking and Entering’ demonstration, he managed to open the door.

He opened the door a few inches and put his eye to the crack, but could see nothing in the gloom. The light from his flash showed a fine wire drawn taut by the door. He eased the pressure and shone his light into the room. All he saw was the corner of a desk and a bit of a shelf or counter.

He eased the door closed and made sure it latched before reconnoitering the other buildings. They were bobby trapped in the same fashion, except for one of the out buildings which had a padlock. Adam managed to pick the lock and when he opened the door, there was no wire.

He eased the door open and found the one room filled with boxes and crates. The writing on the side identified them as military equipment. There were old M-20 carbines, ammunition, field supplies in the form of tents, field kitchens, lanterns and other camping paraphernalia. He left the building, relocking the padlock and, feeling paranoid, wiped it clean of fingerprints. He tried to puzzle out how the tripwires were set with only a couple of inches of room and why the munitions had no trap.

As he rejoined Jason, they heard the sound of horns, again, fading to the south. The rangers looked at each other and Adam shrugged his shoulders.

They moved out to the south, stopping to listen every few yards. The mysterious horns made them nervous. Neither could recall John Lamont having mentioned them.

An hour later they came across the tracks of several dozen men. They were wearing boots and tennis shoes and had broken the brush down in a wide swath. It was obvious that a line of beaters had been through the area.

Redoubling their caution they followed the trail until they found a body hanging by its ankles from a tree. It was the body of a man with his throat cut. He was wearing only a pair of gym shorts with Leesville High School on one leg.

Taking his glasses, Jason studied the body carefully. "His feet are all torn up," Jason said. "There are scratches and gashes on his legs from brambles. He has no tattoos that I can see." He continued his observations as the body slowly rotated at the end of its bonds.

Adam looked at Jason and said, "They were hunting him!"

"Who was?" asked Jason.

"Whoever was blowing the horns. It's like that story I read a long time ago. About some count who owned an island and when people got shipwrecked or something, he hunted them.

“Crap, what was it called? Yeah, ‘The Dangerous Game’. No, ‘The Most Dangerous Game’. Anyway, something like that.”

They circled wide around the body, not knowing if anyone was coming back for it. They struck off south again. They followed the railroad tracks to Pitkin and looked over the town. The buildings that were standing were freshly painted and had their windows and doors boarded up. Farther along, in Dido, they saw the same thing. At Elizabeth, they saw their first human beings.

A group of men, women and children were painting the few buildings that remained of the town. They were being guarded by a group of tattooed men and women. The guards were naked from the waist up and intricately tattooed.

Jason and Adam watched them for the rest of the day, but nothing happened until night started to fall. Then, the workers were lined up and marched to one of the buildings that had been painted and had the windows boarded up. A box, which might have been food, and several large jugs were placed inside the door and it was shut and a padlock attached.

“This is weird,” said Jason. “What are they doing? Painting all the buildings and sealing them up? Are they escapees from the nut house or something?”

Adam shrugged and said, “We can’t capture any of the tattooed ‘ladies’ down there, but what do you think of getting one of the captives away?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jason. “What if the guy we saw in the woods was an escapee. We could have the whole pack of them on our tails. Dad wouldn’t be too happy about that.”

“You know, we are supposed to get intel. The best way to get it would be grabbing one of the workers.”

“I agree, but let’s do it on the way back. That way, we can move freely without hauling someone along who would slow us down and may get us caught.”

Adam reluctantly agreed and they faded away into the surrounding countryside.

They spent the night in an abandoned barn that hadn’t been painted and boarded up. The hay was moldy and smelled of rats, but it was better than the open. It had been clouding up all day and that night a heavy rain fell. The boys had to move their beds from under leaks, but finally found a dry corner.

They woke the next morning to the sound of horses and a large party of people on the country lane that led to the barn. They quickly rolled their beds and fluffed the hay. Peeking out of a crack between two warped boards, they saw guards, mounts, workers and a wagon of supplies. A man tattooed to resemble a lion, with his hair fluffed into a mane, ordered the crew to repair and paint the barn. Jason and Adam rushed quietly to the back of the building and out the small back door. They hid in the bushes just as several workers and guards rounded the corner of the barn.

They lay hidden in the brush for two hours until work was halted for lunch and the crew and guards returned to the front of the barn. Jason and Adam slowly and carefully edged back to a brush-choked draw and followed it to a grove of trees where they stopped to catch their breath and rest.

They were both soaked with nervous sweat and tense from their close escape. Adam studied their back trail while Jason filled their canteens at a small brook running through the center of the copse.

“Okay, no more buildings,” Jason said, moving to Adam’s side. “That scared the crap out of me.”

“Yeah,” returned Adam, still searching their back trail for signs of pursuit.

From Elizabeth they moved east towards a small park on their map near I-49. They had decided that they would follow the interstate to Lafayette where I-10 intersected it. Then they would strike west along I-10 to Beaumont.

The journey east showed them nothing new. There were teams of workers in every town to which they came or the towns had already be refurbished and boarded up. The heard the horns several times, but never sighted the hunts.

They killed for meat or raided vegetable patches or orchards. They had run out of the trail food they brought and were forced to live off the land. They used the hides of the deer to make new moccasins, rough curing the skins.

They both grew beards that itched and bathed when they could. Their clothes were getting ragged from the brush, brambles and the occasional barbed wire fence they were forced to cross.

At Chicot State Park they rested for two days before turning south. They had been on the road for three weeks and they were feeling a sense of urgency to get back. Their four weeks was about over and they were only halfway on their proposed trip. Jason knew that his father would wait an extra day or two, but beyond that, Leo would set out to find them. He had their route and would probably find several of their camps.

“It will take us three days to get to Lafayette, and five more, at best, to get to Beaumont. Dad won’t stay put for much longer than another day or two,” said Jason. “Look, there isn’t much we will find out until we can get a worker and we can’t do that until we are close to the border. What do you say we head cross country from here and hit I-10 around Iowa? That would cut a couple of days off our trip.”



“We should have cut southeast, then instead of ending up here. John Lamont thinks that the reavers have their headquarters in Layfayette.”

“Shoulda, coulda, didn’t. If I know my dad, he and Zach and a bunch of troopers are going to head in when we don’t show up and it could get them all killed. There are a bunch of these reavers and you know what happened to the last patrol they sent in.”

Adam agreed and they set out towards Iowa, Louisiana the next morning. They topped a rise in the morning and saw the town laid out before them. Just west of town they saw I-10 and began to parallel it to the north. Towards Vinton they woke to the sounds of horns nearby. They hastily rolled their blankets and prepared to march.

They began looking for horses, since they were close to the border, but they found nothing. Adam was stepping onto a narrow lane when out of the trees behind and south of them two girls crashed. They were dressed in running shorts and nothing else. The blonde screamed when she saw them, but her companion simply collapsed on the tarmac.

Adam sprang forward and clapped his hand over the screaming girl’s mouth. Jason grabbed the sitting girl and they sprang across to the woods on the other side.

They slid into Gum Gully and raced south, each ranger carrying a girl. Adam put his burden down and ordered her to follow Jason. She started to say something and he roughly shoved her in the direction he wanted her to go. Then he sprang to the top of the gully and tore out several bushes, causing a small slide of fresh dirt.

He slid down to the bottom of the gully and sifted leaves and dirt over their trail. He did the best he could under the circumstances to hide all signs of their passage. When he turned to follow his party, he saw the girl standing where he had left her, a large branch in her hands.

Exasperated, he grabbed her and they hurried towards a bend in the gully. Rounding it, they came face to face with Jason and the red-head. He was holding her from running back.

The two girls hugged and then they moved at the boys urging. The horns blasted behind them and Adam pulled one of his few remaining arrows from his quiver. “Do you know how to shoot?” he asked the blonde. He gave her one of his pistols when she nodded. “Don’t unless it is absolutely necessary and I give the okay. Understand?”

The disheveled girl nodded and looked determined. The sounds of pursuit faded to the northwest. They paused long enough for the boys to give their shirts to the girls. Jason and Adam cut holes in their blankets and made serapes with them. Adam began making moccasins from the pieces of hide he was carrying.

As he worked, Jason allowed them to rest. Afterwards, he got them up and walking again. The girls were sisters and introduced themselves as Sandra and Rachel. Sandra was the red-head.

For the rest of the night, they walked, resting ten minutes every hour. The girls wanted to walk on I-10, but Adam insisted that they walk several yards to the north of the highway. He was sure that the reavers kept a watch on the road. Jason ranged ahead a hundred yards.

By the third morning, the girls were exhausted and Adam suggested that they rest for a couple of hours. Adam found an isolated spot and began to make camp. While he cut branches for beds and built a small fire, Jason took his bow and went hunting. By the time the camp was ready and the fire burned to coals, he came back with a turkey.

The girls could hardly keep awake to eat and immediately after dinner went to sleep. Adam took first watch and Jason lay down to sleep.

Several times over the course of the previous days they had hidden from an increasingly intense hunt. At one point, they had lain in a small creek under the bank while a party of hunters passed. They were forced to sit, huddled, in the water while several tattooed men searched the bushes.

When the girls woke the next day, Jason had the rest of the turkey and some berries ready for breakfast. This was the first time since they had met that they had time to sit and talk. Before, they lay down to sleep and rose with the dawn and pushed on. Jason had discouraged talking because of the hunt.

“Where do you girls come from?” asked Jason.

Sandra swallowed and answered, “Over in Mississippi. A little town called Turnbull. Our folks had family there and we moved from Jackson when the plague hit. Most of the town was killed by the sickness, but we got through it alright.

“That lasted for four years. Daddy said to keep our heads down and we would be safe.”

“Yeah,” continued Rachel, “but they found us anyway. They came one night and killed Mommy and Daddy and the old man who lived with us. Sandy and me, they took to Lafayette.

“There was some older guy who looked to run things. He had tattoos all over and was really ugly. He gave us something, but we wouldn’t take it. Daddy was always saying how bad drugs were. The others that they caught at the same time as us, they took it and, well, it was weird.”

“What was weird?” prompted Adam.

Sandra answered. “They looked liked they were stoned or something. A guy like a priest smoked something and blew it in the faces of each one. They didn’t cough or anything. Then

this priest says something to the Tats, those are the guys who do the tattooing, and they made a mark on the shoulder, like the start of a tattoo.

“When they came to Rachel and me, we flinched and coughed and they took us out to a big pen where a lot of other people were. These are the workers that do all of the painting and fixing up and stuff.”

“Wait a minute. What is it with the painting and such?” asked Jason.

“Oh, that,” said Rachel. “That’s got something to do with a book the leader has or wrote or something. Anyway, it says that we have to keep our houses in order and the head guy puts everyone who doesn’t take the drug and join his army to fixing and painting.”

Jason nodded and said, “Sorry. Go on with your story.”

“Well, we spent the next, gosh, year, I think on work crews. Then, last week, one of the supervisors took a liking to Rachel. She gets cranky when she’s tired and she didn’t like the guy anyway, so she laid into him and told him off and said to leave her alone.”

Rachel blushed and nodded.

Sandy laughed at the memory. “Tigerboy didn’t like it, but another of the rules is ‘Don’t Covet’ and he couldn’t force her or anything. But he could select her for a hunt.”

“You mean like the ones with horns and beaters and stuff?” asked Jason.

“Oh, yeah. Usually they hunt someone who tries to escape, but when there isn’t an escapee, they select someone from the crew and give them a three-hour head start and hunt them.”

Adam had a puzzled look on his face and he asked, “Why?”

Rachel, who had attached herself to Jason, took his hand and said, “It has something to do with training or graduation from training for the young fighters. Those are the beaters and they get a special portion of their tattoo if they catch the quarry.”

Sandra inserted, “It has something to do with another law or rule, something about seven trumps, whatever that is. We couldn’t read the Book of Rules because we were Outsiders.”

She nodded for her sister to go on. “I got selected for the next hunt by Tigerboy, but Sandy tried to fight them and they selected her, too. We had been running for a while when we met you and you saved us,” Rachel concluded.

Adam looked at Jason. “I wish we could get a copy of this Book of Rules. It might tell us what they are up to.”

Jason agreed, but the girls insisted that the only copy was kept in Lafayette. All the leaders had to memorize the book as part of their training. Only when they had committed the Book of Rules to memory were they allowed to lead a raid.

They cleaned up the camp, burying the fire and hiding the boughs they had cut for their beds. When they stepped out, they fell into the pattern they had assumed from the second day. Sandra and Adam walked ahead and Jason and Rachel formed the rear guard.

Each girl had been given a pistol and a throwing knife and the rangers had given them some basic training. By the time they entered into Texas, they had become fairly adept at woodcraft.

They had passed Orange, Texas just before dawn and they were on the lookout for Texan patrols.

Later that day, near Vidor, Texas, they encountered a strong patrol from the west and came out of hiding when Jason recognized his dad in the lead. Leo leapt off his horse and

hugged Jason to him. The rest of the troopers gathered around and congratulated the two rangers.

The girls held back until Adam took Sandra's hand and led her forward. He introduced her to Leo, Zach and John Lamont and the rest of the troops. "Guys, this is Sandra and that's here sister, Rachel." He looked surprised. "We never exchanged last names, did we?" he asked Sandra.

She laughed and shook her head. "No, I guess we didn't."

Rachel reach over and shook Leo's hand and said, "The last name is Parker. Sandy and Rachel Parker from Turnbull, Mississippi."

Zach let out a laugh and Leo grinned. Jason looked stunned and the girls looked confused at the reaction to their names.

"Don't let it worry you, Rach," said Zach. I'm sure that Jason will explain when he gets the time.

"Right now, I think we had better ride." He nodded to a line of figures running hard at them from the east.

The troopers mounted, four taking an additional burden behind them. They reversed their course and rode towards Beaumont.

Although they debriefed the girls, there was little else they learned about the reavers. They earned tattoos by performing well on raids, in hunts and supervising work crews and getting work done.

Jason and Adam wanted to go back in and get a copy of the Book of Rules, but they were overridden by Leo and Zach. The two older men pointed out that the copy of the book would be closely guarded and their chances of getting it were nil.

Upon their return to Ganado, Zach bought clothes for the girls and asked Jeremiah Hopkins to find a place for them. While Eduardo and the boys rounded up their stock, Zach bought supplies, trading with Jefferson government chits for which he had swapped before leaving Mitchell.

Leo met Zach when he returned to camp. Appleton helped him unload the packhorses. Zach asked where the boys were and Leo grinned and answered, "They are out riding with Rachel and Sandra."

Zach knew Leo well enough by now and asked, "What's up?"

"The girls want to go with us to Mitchell. The boys have taken a fancy to them, I think."

After commenting about Jason getting a Parker of his own, Zach said, "Its fine with me. Do they want to marry first or wait until we get home?"

"Oh, I think Cathy would want them to wait, at least, Jason. You know how women are about weddings."

Zach shook his head. "Well, I won't be chaperoning them, that will be your job. And let the girls know that they will be helping out. I hope they can ride."

They bought Rachel and Sandra riding outfits and horses. They needed an extra packhorse and supplies, tents and sleeping bags. Zach and Leo didn't say anything when they found out that the sleeping bags zipped together. Eduardo just smiled.

The herd started off one morning early. Zach's idea was to get the herd and the girls trail broken at the start. Though there was the usual grumbling, no one asked for special favors.

By the time they had reached the cutoff to Rio Grande, Adam had started sleeping outside. The men noticed it, but said nothing. Sandra and Adam weren't on speaking terms by the time they reached the Mound.

Leo asked Jason what the matter was. His son told him that Adam had gotten cold feet about marrying Sandra and she was pretty upset. “Sandy kind of thought they were a couple, sleeping together and all.”

Zach thanked Adam for his help, dismissed him to The Barracks and asked him to write up the mission report for Carl. Meanwhile, the rest drove the small herd to The Ranch, where Sarah made a fuss over the girls and Anne made a fuss over Eduardo.

Leo and Jason were anxious to get home and left after a quick lunch. They took Rachel and Sandra with them.

Zach and Eduardo told the story of their trip and explained the problem that had arisen between Adam and Sandra. The wives immediately began preparations for the wedding. They planned on traveling up to visit Cathy and organize the whole thing.

A week later, Adam rode up to The Ranch. He was there to have Zach read over his report on the expedition, but Sarah soon divined that his real reason was to see Sandra. He asked several off hand questions about Rachel and Jason and looked around for any sign of Rachel’s sister.

The women invited him to accompany them to the Appleton’s place while they went over wedding plans and he agreed, stressing that he wanted Jason to read the report, too, before he turned it in to Carl.

Zach, Eduardo and Karl left David, Brandon and Elizabeth in charge and tagged along. The men wanted to see the reaction between Adam, who appeared to regret his treatment of Sandra and the girl in question. With Adam’s stubbornness and Sandra’s temper, they expected fireworks.



The Third Rangers had finished a training course with Leo and were ready to depart for Mitchell when the visitors rode up. The first thing they saw was Sandra talking and laughing with Eric Compton and Adrian Mitchell.

Adam's face clouded over and he stormed off to find Jason, ignoring Rachel's greeting. When he located Jason working in the blacksmith shop on the property, he threw the report down and demanded to know what was happening with Sandra and if she was seeing Eric or Adrian.

Jason was taken aback at his friend's attitude. "She's been seeing all of the Third, when they are off. After all, she is the only eligible girl around. I haven't noticed if she is with them more than the others. What do you care for? You dumped her, didn't you?"

Adam told him to shut up and he stalked over to his horse without acknowledging anyone and spurred down the road towards town. Sandra watched him go with a knowing smile on her face.

The Third Rangers rode off soon after and the women gathered in Cathy's house for a wedding planning meeting. The men made themselves scarce and went fishing. They returned when Cathy ran the recall flag up the tree and they gathered for a fish-fry.

Carl called a few days later to ask Zach what was the matter with Adam Silver. He was usually even tempered, but he had gotten into fights with Eric and Adrian over, what appeared to be, nothing. When Carl called him on the carpet for the fights, he was sullen and insolent. Carl was thinking of having him banished for a month or two and wanted to know Zach's thoughts on the matter.

"Carl, the boy is in love. You know that girl we brought back from Louisiana? One of the twins? Well, her name is Sandra. Her sister, Rachel, is going to marry Jason Appleton.

Anyway, Adam and Sandy were pretty thick when we started back, but Adam got cold feet and said that he 'just wanted to be friends'. That old b.s.

"So, Sandy got understandably upset. They had been sleeping together up till that point. It got pretty bad and they ended up not speaking to each other by the time we got back,

"Since then, Adam has had second thoughts about the matter, but, like an idiot, hasn't apologized or, even, told Sandy. Then he sees her talking to Eric and Adrian and he goes ballistic. Since then, he has been a jerk and is ready to go at it with everybody.

"I don't know but that a little banishment wouldn't do him some good. However, lock him up in a cell so he can't get into any real trouble and I'll go talk to Sandy."

Carl chuckled down the line, "Okay, Cupid, have at it, but if something doesn't change, I'm going to have to do something official. By-the-way, he's been in a cell since the last fight, yesterday"

Zach told Sarah where he was going and, after a moments hesitation, declined her offer to talk with Sandra. He felt that an unsympathetic person would have more effect.

As he rode into the yard, he saw Rachel and Sandra talking on a bench in the yard as they prepared vegetables for dinner. He waved at Cathy who was standing at her door and rode up to the girls. He dismounted and asked Sandra to take a walk with him. The girls exchanged glances and Sandra got up and fell in beside Zach as he walked towards the lake.

"Adam is about to get himself banished, Sandy," Zach started without preamble.

"What do I care?" she answered.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe you're still in love with him?"

"I am not! I hate him!" she shouted.

“If that’s the way you feel, then fine. I just wanted you to know, in case there were still feelings there. But, since you hate him, then Carl will send him before me and we’ll get banish him.” Zach turned back to where his horse stood cropping grass.

“Wait!” called Sandra.

Zach stopped and stood looking at her.

“I mean, what will happen when he’s banished?” she asked.

“Doesn’t matter. We will get rid of him and that will be the end of it.” He turned towards his mount, again.

“What’s he done?” asked Sandra, putting a hand on Zach’s arm.

Zach gave her a puzzled look. “Stupid things, but enough to get him thrown out of Jefferson.”

“What kind of things?”

“Fights, mostly. He beat a couple of other rangers pretty badly and gave Carl a lot of backtalk. Insubordination. General bad attitude.”

“Who did he fight?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter, does it? Eric Compton and Adrian Mitchell. Broke Eric’s nose and dislocated Adrian’s shoulder. Why are you so interested?”

Rachel, who had come up to the two, said, “Don’t be stupid, Sandy. Tell him.”

Sandy got a stubborn look on her face and shook her head.

“Do you want me to?” demanded Rachel.

Sandra broke down and hid her face in her hands, weeping. Rachel put her arm around her sister and looked at Zach. “She’s still mad at Adam for dumping her. She doesn’t hate him and she knows it.

“Besides, she’s pregnant.”

Zach asked, unthinking, “Adam’s?”

Sandra cried harder and Rachel gave him a withering look, “Of course it is. What kind of girl do you think Sandy is?”

Zach held up his hands as if to ward off a blow. He thought, but was too wise a man to say out loud that, being pregnant without a husband, the answer to that question was obvious.

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I don’t suppose Adam knows.

“I’ll tell you what. You have twenty-four hours to straighten this out or it becomes official and he is brought before me for banishment. Twenty-four hours, understand?”

The two girls nodded and Rachel asked if he would wait for them while they got ready. Zach agreed and they dashed off for Jason’s cabin. When Cathy came up, he explained what was going on and she went to help the girls get ready.

Jason came out of the barn and he and Zach hitched up Cathy’s light wagon. When they were finished, Jason saddled his horse, indicating that he was going with them.

They rode to Mitchell, stopping briefly at The Ranch where Zach took Sarah aside and told her what was happening. She immediately grabbed her shawl and joined the girls in the surrey.

When they reached town, Sandra was stunned that Adam was incarcerated. Zach had Sarah hold her back while he grabbed the keys and went to the cells. Adam was sitting dejected on the narrow bunk. He looked up eagerly when Zach appeared.

“You have a visitor. Sandy came down to try and talk some sense into that pig head of yours. Do you want to see her?” Zach said. His manner was unfriendly and stern.

Adam hesitated a moment and Zach added, "This is your last chance, old son. You mess this up and you will likely be banished. To tell you the truth, you are the only person who can get you out of this mess. It won't matter to the banishment court what she says or doesn't say. So don't go out there and try and sweet talk her into backing you.

"I'm only doing this for her. You don't deserve any favors."

Adam hung his head and walked out of the cell. His clothes were torn and dirty and he had a black eye and a mouse on his left cheek. He hadn't even cleaned off the dried blood from his nose, just smeared it around with his sleeve. It was obvious to Zach that, in addition to the visible injuries, he was suffering from a hangover.

Zach put him into an interview room and left to get Sandra. He brought her back to the same room and let her in, saying, "I'll be waiting in the office. Call me when you are done."

About an hour later, the Adam and Sandra came into the room. There was evidence of tears on both faces, but they were holding hands.

"Zach, I want to apologize for all the trouble I caused. I guess I was pretty stupid."

"Adam, I am the least of the ones you need to apologize to. Eric and Adrian should be at the top of your list, then Carl, then just about everyone in Mitchell. My advice? I would start with Eric and Adrian, then report to Carl for company punishment.

Sandra came over and kissed Zach on the cheek and said, "Thanks."

"Great, now I have to ride home with a jealous wife berating me for sweeping young girls off their feet."

Sarah gave him an exasperated look and lightly punched him on the shoulder.

Sandra laughed and turned to Rachel. "Can you wait another week for your wedding? It will take three weeks for the bans to be read for Adam and me."

Rachel gave her sister a hug and the four women walked out together. Jason pumped Adam's hand and congratulated him. Zach nodded for Jason to follow the women. When Adam started to follow him, Zach took him by the arm and turned him around.

"I'll tell Carl that you can be released on your own recognizance. Until then, you are still his prisoner. Back to the cell."

Adam was the most cheerful prisoner Zach had ever incarcerated. He went in search of Carl and told him what had happened at the jail. Carl agreed to see Adam immediately and set off. Zach made a detour to see Father Tillford to inform him that another set of bans was to be read on Sunday.

He found Jason, Sarah, Cathy, Rachel and Sandra having lunch in the hotel. They went back to The Ranch, Jason and the girls continuing to the Appleton's. Three weeks later they had a double wedding with Eric and Adrian as best men.

Adam spent the time between incarceration and marriage working on his house in the Appleton complex. Carl assigned him to work under the supervision of Leo as his company punishment. Adam often said afterward that he would rather clean out septic tanks than work for Leo.

## Chapter 14

### Initial Encounters

*Spring 2049*

*Jason and Adam didn't find out what we were looking for, but I don't know if they ever could. This unique society of reavers is completely different from the 'normal' reavers. They seem to be part of some warrior society with a code of some sort. The code is in a book, of which there is only one copy, hidden away in their capitol.*

*The warriors take some sort of drug. This drug turns them to zombies or addicts or something. They have no compunction about killing or being killed. 'Normal' reavers would raid and try to get away. These guys kill and burn and take captives of the young. The difference is that they don't care if they are tracked down. They will fight to the death or commit suicide. Their sole objective is to destroy or capture the civilian population. Thus they negate the need for troops and, I am guessing, that is their objective. As John Lamont said, there is no need of the troops and bases if there are no civilians to guard. The troops pull back and the new brand of reavers have a buffer zone.*

*We don't even know if they will occupy that zone or not later on.*

*It is strange and usual tactics don't seem to work. The 'normal' reavers will surrender or scatter and try to escape when their formation is overwhelmed. The guys fight to the last man or woman after killing their captives. This increases our casualties tenfold.*

*To invade Louisiana, we would have to send in a huge force because we know that they would not retreat or surrender and that we would have to kill every one of them. These are*

*whole new animals. Maybe we need to come up with a new name for them, other than reavers. Locust comes to mind. I'll talk it over with Carl and the boys.*

*Another puzzling aspect is this compulsion to keep all buildings in good repair. It seems to be another of their rules. I sure would like to get a look at this Book of Rules of theirs.*

*On a lighter note: I hope I was never as goofy as Adam. He had convinced himself that he didn't want to get married and he was fighting his feelings for Sandra something fierce. Even after he had bedded her and then refused to marry her. Then, to top it all off, when she started seeing Adrian Mitchell and Eric Compton, he made a complete, jealous fool of himself. He was lucky that Carl didn't ask for him to be banished. The last straw was his getting jealous of Jason. Rachel is clearly not of the same stripe as Peggy and Mary Parker. There is no way she is going to let Jason have a second wife.*

*It was the first marriage I presided over where the groom and the best man had to have the three weeks of the bans to recover from black eyes and broken noses.*

*The troop from Big Valley has invited the troops on a pig hunt. They are having trouble with a population of wild pigs whose forefathers escaped a couple of years ago. Some of the boys want to hunt them with boar spears. It's their choice, but I will discourage it. In three years there won't be any giant hogs, but they will be big enough, not like Hogzilla my grandfather told me about when I was a kid.*

*Harvest is coming on. Good thing. William is complaining about all the jars and wax he has in storage for canning. The crops look good, except for some problem with birds and the fruit. There is getting to be a lot of crows and other feathered pests. We may have to arm the younger kids with shotguns and turn them loose.*



*I'm not looking forward to the next winter. Either my blood is getting thinner or the winters are getting colder. Our main project is to get in enough firewood for three households for the whole winter. I can hardly wait for the boys to get big enough so I can supervise them while they work.*

*The new bulls and stallions are settling in. I was able to trade some of the old stock to Milo Campbell in Cave Valley. His bulls were part of the original herd and were getting a little long in the tooth. I suppose they will end up being salt beef or jerky.*

Disturbing news arrived from Ganado. Twenty Troop had been hit by a band of the Louisiana reavers. They had been on routine patrol along the border when the reavers attacked. They had managed to escape only because the reavers had set an ambush that they sprung too early. Two days later, the supply train to Beaumont had been wiped out. Tracks pointed to Louisiana reavers. It seemed that the border fighting had taken a new direction. The reavers were attacking the military, now that most of the civilians had been forced west.

The Texans were calling for any help that could be provided. A hurried conference of the Jefferson government was called. Carl encouraged an all out effort to meet the threat. He suggested that they call upon their allies, the Kansans and the Arkansawyers to form an expedition.

Al Relgado, the governor, asked Carl to put together a plan of operations and to contact their allies to see what support on which they could count. Gail O'Malley, mayor of Mitchell, also asked for a report on the situation with the New Africans, Mahdists, Reavers and Aztecs.

Carl and his staff worked feverishly and reported back at the end of the next week. His appraisal of the situation was sobering. He proposed that fully half of their troops, including both mechanized units, be committed to the effort. Raphael had promised them three troops and

the Arkansawyers committed to sending two troops and a ranger troop. John Short promised that a war band of Cherokees would join them and the Sioux had promised a hundred volunteers.

The New Africans were rebuilding their strength during the lull with the Mahdists. The Caliphate was still in the midst of factional infighting. The Missouri reavers were exhausted from their continual warfare and Raphael felt that they were in the last throws of having large, cohesive bands. The Aztecs were quiet and the new ruler of Albuquerque had sent envoys to Taos to talk of opening up trade similar to that between Palo Duro and El Paso.

There was some serious discussion about sending all of their armor such a distance. Some members of the government felt that it would be reckless to leave them so bereft of the one weapon that assured them superiority on the battlefield.

Carl calmly explained the situation. “Ladies and gentlemen, the problem we will be facing in Louisiana is unique. The enemy balks at nothing to kill our men. Ten will die to get one of ours. There is nothing we can do against that kind of enemy using conventional wisdom. Their casualties will be many times ours, but we will sustain more casualties on our own than we can afford.

“Our estimates of their fighters are upwards of two thousand. We can look for losses of two hundred, at ten-to-one. That is ten troops. Almost half of our forces. Clinically speaking, we are looking at abandoning Taos and Palo Duro and, possibly, Trinidad with those losses.

“The scouts and all other sources of information gave no indication that these reavers had armor or guns big enough to do significant damage. Now, I’m not saying that we can let them roll in by themselves, but they will give us a significant advantage. We would use the pickups, artillery and troops to support the armor.”

“Does that mean that our casualties will be negligible?” asked Thomas Banner, delegate from Trinidad.

Patently Carl answered. “Of course not. There is a possibility of annihilation with any battle, as well as no casualties. I am hoping to reduce the possibility of our suffering casualties, is all.”

John Black, the military advisor from Gunnison, supported Carl and his call for using the armor during the attack on Louisiana. “From what I have heard, these new breed of reavers offer us the greatest challenge we have yet faced. They are cutting up the Texans pretty good. They have lost a lot of civilians and are about to lose a large chunk of territory. I don’t see the reavers as stopping there, either.

“We can fight them at the Texas-Louisiana border before they grow too strong, or we can fight them in a few years when they are virtually unstoppable. I say, hit them now and hit them hard.”

“What about the prisoners? Won’t these people kill them when we attack? Can we justify that kind of slaughter?” asked Don Waters of Questa.

“That is probably the worst excuse for doing nothing,” interjected Grace. “If we had thought that way, we never would have escaped from the Mahdists. Carl, do you have any kind of plan to keep the captive casualties to a minimum?”

“Yes, ma’am, we do. We will be sending in rangers, in small groups of two to five to scout out the lay of the land and to keep us from safe from a surprise attack. When possible, as they come across groups of prisoners, they will make an effort to rescue them and send them to the rear, into Texas.

“John Lamont, the military leader for the Texans, has reported that the suicide drug the reavers are taking is carried between the left cheek and the gum. He is convinced that, if we can manage to capture any of the reavers and remove the drug, they can be rehabilitated, once the original drug wears off. They are trying to capture a live reaver to test it out. For whatever it is worth, when we start this operation, we will do everything in our power to capture rather than kill, if it does not endanger our troops.”

After further discussion, the Jefferson Congress agreed to mount the expedition. They ordered the required troops to be assembled at Palo Duro under the overall command of Carl Smythe.

Carl thanked them and excused himself to begin assembling his staff and finalize their plans. A pall descended on the remaining members in attendance. They realized that this was the gravest challenge that they had ever faced.

Carl ordered the mechanized units to start for Palo Duro immediately. He also ordered several trucks with MRE rations to travel with them. Over the next week, the Defense Committee took readiness reports from the settlements and assembled a final roster of troops which would make up the expedition. Mitchell would send First, Second and Fourth Troops with the First and Fourth Rangers and the Five Troop (Mechanized). To fill in the gap, Eighteen Troop out of Big Valley would move to Mitchell. The Sioux volunteers would meet at Mitchell on the seventh of October and the two contingents would travel together.

Taos would include Twenty-six and Twenty-seven Troops and Thirteenth Rangers. They would cross the mountains and join Twenty-one Troop out of Trinidad, and Thirteen and Nineteen Troops from Gunnison. They would meet the Cherokee Troops and march to Palo Duro together.

At Palo Duro, Sixteen and Seventeen Troops and Seventh Rangers would be waiting to form the last contingent of troops. The Kansans and Arkansawyers would travel directly to Ganado. The twenty-fifth of October was the date set to assemble the full force. Carl and his staff would arrive on the fifteenth to plan the expedition with the Texans.

Twenty Troop would remain in Texas and wait for the rest of the expedition.

The Texans would supply mounts, so trucks, outfitted by the Sinclair Group would provide transportation of the troops and supplies. By the time the expedition was ready, it took thirty heavy duty trucks, three dump trucks, thirty-two machine gun mounted pickups and twelve other pickups, two ambulances and a van to accommodate all the troops, their gear and supplies.

John Sinclair, twiddling his pencil, told Carl that the only vehicles left were eight tractors, which could be used to haul freight, but would be very slow. Carl thanked him for the effort he and his team had put in and declined the tractors.

Two Wolves arrived with his Sioux several days early, explaining that his men were eager to get going. They arrived with a party air. Carl decided to set off a day early and preparations were stepped up.

Zach and Karl spent a couple of sober days with their families, everyone realizing how much more dangerous the coming fight was than any of the others. Leo and his sons and Adam Silver joined them the last evening. In the morning, Leo said a benediction and they left to teary smiles.

They made good time and made Palo Duro a day after the Taos group. Ishtar Singh met them with his usual energy. They rested for a day and Carl's staff set out for Ganado early the next morning.

The staff consisted of Karl, Zach, Hans Minkema, Leo, Samuel Ling, Thomas Fahrner, Ishtar Singh, Harry McGregor, Paul Rogers and Ed Black. They took the van and several MG trucks driven by One Troop as an escort.

The Texas plains were virtually empty and they pushed the vehicles hard. When they reached Ganado, they found the Kansas and Arkansas troops had arrived in time to support the Texans and stabilize the situation. John Lamont had been driven out of Beaumont and there had been serious pressure just south of the Toledo Bend Reservoir, where Jason and Adam had entered Louisiana.

The Texans had been hard pressed until the Raphael and Ralph Meeker had arrived and crushed the northern flank of the reavers. This threw them into disarray and they had been wiped out. The combined forces had killed some eighty reavers and had captured three that were unconscious when found. Two of them had managed to commit suicide, but the other's capsule had been removed before he had a chance to use it.

"Where is he now?" asked Carl.

John Lamont pointed to the hospital, "We have him under guard there, but he is in really sad shape. That drug he is addicted to is pretty powerful. The doctors have been trying all sorts of drugs that are supposed to fight addiction, but they haven't done much. They have had to give him morphine for the pain and he goes into severe seizures unless kept in an almost comatose state."

Carl asked John to call a meeting of the expedition council as soon as he could. Raphael brought two of his officers and Ralph one of his. There were six representatives from the Texans. Two Wolves represented the Sioux and John Short represented the Cherokee.

John Lamont had a detailed map of the border from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arkansas border pinned on one wall of their war room. It was a patchwork of Forest Survey maps which showed the area in great detail.

Green pins showed the Texan strong points, red pins where concentrations of reavers were thought to be and black pins showed where battles, raids and skirmishes had taken place. The participants of the meeting noted the preponderance of black pins.

The first order of business was to determine how many troops and what equipment was available for the expedition. With the allies brought by Jefferson and their own troops, there were six hundred and sixteen men, four tanks, and thirty-two machine gun mounted pickups. The Texans could supply two hundred and eighty men. This would leave a pitifully thin force to guard the border if the reavers managed to avoid the expedition and attack.

The total number for the expedition came to eight hundred and ninety-six. The plan that evolved put the tanks and half of the MG trucks on I-10 toward Lafayette, the reaver capitol. They would be supported by four artillery pieces, the Texas rangers and four hundred troops.

Another column would take eight MG trucks and two hundred troops and enter Louisiana on State Route 12. They would drive for Kinder and hold for further instructions.

The third column would enter at De Ridder and push across country to Oakdale. There they would wait for the fourth column. The makeup of this third column would be unique. It would consist of One Troop, Seventh Rangers, Thirteenth Rangers and the Sioux. They would push off two days prior to the main assault. Their task would be to make a sweep of the country, freeing any prisoners and eliminating reavers. It was the hope of the council that their actions would draw the rest of the reavers out of position and make them vulnerable for the main assault.

The fourth, northernmost column would consist of the remaining six MG trucks, six empty cargo trucks, Two, Twenty-One and Twenty Troops and the Arkansawyers. They would head for the cache of weapons Jason and Adam discovered on their scout. If they were there, they would load them onto the cargo trucks and Twenty-one Troop would escort them back to Genado. The rest of the column would continue on to Oakdale, cleaning up any bands of reavers and freeing prisoners and join the third column at Oakdale.

When the two columns joined, they would continue on to I-49. From there they would sweep south to Lafayette. If the first two columns had stalled, the combined column would attack Lafayette. If the attack had reached Lafayette, the combined column would swing east and attack from that direction.

Carl put forth the suggestion that they send in small groups of rangers to rescue the work parties, but it was overridden. The Texans and Arkansawyers felt that this kind of rescue effort would alert the reavers and cause them to start a general slaughter.

The others in the room offered suggestions and they refined the plan in small details, but the basic campaign was approved. Leo, Zach and Harry McGregor huddled with Two Wolves to plan their operation, since they would be leaving almost immediately after the rest of the force arrived.

Leo had asked for the First Rangers for Column Three, but was overridden. Zach knew that he was worried about Jason and Gregg. Carl explained how important it was to have the best rangers for the second column. The northern two columns were part of a broad pincer movement, but it was not the main thrust of the campaign. The second column would be in the greatest danger of ambush and would need the expedition's best scouts.



Three days later the rest of the troops arrived. Mounts were issued to the members of the third column. These would be used until they reached SR 12 from where they would proceed on foot. They rode straight north, behind the line of border posts, until they reached the road on the Texas side. A rest was called until an hour before sundown. By the time they had reached the border, it was fully dark, with a sliver of moon to provide faint light.

The horses were turned over to waiting Texans and the men of the column split into pre-assigned groups. Thirteenth Rangers formed a skirmish line to the front; One Troop covered the southern flank and a party of Sioux the northern flank. Another group of Sioux brought up the rear. The rest of the Sioux, Seventh Rangers and a group of marksmen under Zach moved at the center of the box.

After they crossed the river, they encountered a small band of reavers camped in a meadow near several buildings they were renovating. Seventh Rangers infiltrated the camp and silenced the reaver guards. They called up Zach's marksmen and the rest of the reavers were shot where they slept.

The workers were frightened, but Leo quickly calmed them. There were a couple of dozen of them in this work party, mostly older men and women. Harry posted a chain of guards around the farm and Zach, Leo and Two Wolves interviewed the slaves.

They said they were part of a larger group that had broken up to work on several farms in the area. Leo pulled out a detailed map of the area and the leader of the slaves, John Dawson, pointed the other three farms that had reavers.

"Okay, John, there's two things we can do. We can bring you along or we can leave you to make your way back to Texas on your own. Don't take this the wrong way, but I would rather

not take you.” Zach said. “We are moving fast and you probably won’t be able to keep up. That means we leave you where you drop.”

“Wait a minute. We have women with us. You can’t just leave us. Where are you going, anyway?” protested John.

“East,” was Zach’s terse reply. “We are going to hit the rest of this work party. You can stay here and hope you aren’t found by another reaver band. We will leave you the weapons, horses and supplies and send the rest of the prisoners we release back here. How many reavers and prisoners were in the whole group?”

“About sixty, sixty-five of us and twenty guards. We are, uh, were the biggest group.

“That means about a dozen workers and three or four guards for each of the other groups. Two Wolves, you find this place. Take no more than thirty men and make sure that a half dozen have silenced weapons. Harry? Take Seventh Rangers and another ten Sioux and find this group. Leo, you and Thirteenth Rangers and ten more Sioux get the last place.

The rest of us will stay here. Be sure that you identify yourselves when you come back. Password is Single, countersign is Malt.”

The three men picked their men and faded into the night. Zach had John collect all the weapons and make packs out of the supplies. The horses were brought in and saddled, waiting for the women and weakest. Each prisoner was given a weapon and a quick course on its operation. They were mostly hunting rifles and older pistols.

When everything was ready, they waited. Zach would not let them cook for fear of the smoke from the fire or the smell of food. He had his men distribute MREs to the work group and they ate silently.

An hour later Two Wolves returned. He had twelve prisoners and had suffered no casualties. He brought back the weapons and supplies loaded on horses. He reported that there was no problem, grinning like a schoolboy.

Harry and Leo returned soon after. Harry had no problem overpowering the reavers, but Leo had one man wounded by a knife. One of the reavers had not been killed and had stabbed one of the Sioux when the Indian was stripping him of weapons. The wound was not serious, but he was out of action and needed medical attention.

Two Wolves assigned him as a guide for the prisoners. Zach sent them west and reformed the men. Assuming the same formation, they proceeded east.

They encountered two more small camps of reavers around farm buildings. These were dispatched with the same silence as the first band. They sent the prisoners west with the mounts, weapons and supplies of the reavers.

At Sugartown, they encountered a larger camp of reavers. Dawn was just breaking and the workers were being herded towards large cooking pots for breakfast. A hasty count showed over a hundred prisoners and twenty to twenty-five guards. Two Wolves took half of his men to form a cordon from SR 113 to the junction of Sam McDonald Road and SR 112.

Leo took the other half to form a line from Leon Stracener Road to SR 112. The rest spread out to the west, effectively surrounding the town. Zach took his marksmen to a low hill north of town and overlooking the camp. He assigned targets to the men and they opened up at his first shot.

As the first guards began to fall, the reavers stood for a second, stunned. By the second round of shots, the guards had spotted the marksmen and charged the hill. None of them lived to reach the shooters.

When Zach gave the all clear signal, the rest of the column closed in, trapping the slaves at the reaver camp. Several of the men grabbed weapons, preparing to defend themselves. Harry, reaching the camp first, called out reassurances to them.

Several of the workers broke down and wept when they realized that they had been rescued. Two Wolves set up a screen to the south and east with his men as Zach, Leo and Harry organized the prisoners. They quickly explained the situation and the rescued men and women began preparations to flee west.

In a surprisingly short length of time the small group was headed down SR 112. Several of the men wanted to join the column, but Zach stressed the need for them to go with the escaping party and protect them. He did not tell them the real reason for refusing their service.

Before they left, the prisoners told them that there was a group of reavers north along SR 113 and another east on SR 112. Leo and Harry urged that they temporarily split their forces and take care of the northern band before they continued. Zach agreed and sent a runner after the escaping prisoners to have them return to wait for the other two groups' prisoners.

Two Wolves took fifty men and five of the marksmen and swung north. He returned by noon with eighteen prisoners and the booty from the reaver camp.

Leo took One Troop, Seventh and Thirteenth Rangers and eliminated the reavers on SR 112. When his group of freed prisoners arrived in Sugartown, Zach sent the freed workers west and brought the rest of the column to join Leo.

As they started east along SR 112, they sent small forces along the roads as they came to the junctions. Soapstone Road was clear, as was Arkadelphia Road. But, as members of the Seventh Rangers reached Morgan Road, they encountered a band of reavers. They fired several shots to warn the main column and beat a hasty retreat. The reavers pursued them and were

eliminated when they ran into a hasty ambush. The column hurried to the junction to find the two guards who had been left with the prisoners, shooting at the scattering slaves.

The rangers quickly dropped the two guards, but they had killed or wounded a dozen of their charges. John Blaine, One Troop medic, did what he could for the wounded. Seven of the slaves returned when they saw that the reavers were dead.

“Zach, two of the wounded are in bad shape,” said John. “I don’t know that they will make it.”

Zach explained that they were making a sweep to the east to free prisoners from the reavers and that they could not take them along. The survivors were dazed at the recent events and concerned about their fate.

Harry took a small force and check Gravel Pit Road while Zach was talking with the workers. He reported the road was clear.

Since it was getting late, Leo suggested that they pull off the road and camp for the night. He took Zach aside and said, “That will give the wounded time to die, if that’s in the cards.”

Zach nodded and they moved to a small forest of new growth and carved out a clearing in the center. They carried in the wounded and made them as comfortable as possible.

While dinner was cooking, the survivors were interviewed. They had not heard of any other work groups in the area, but they had been up Arkadelphia for the last month working on farm buildings north of Tom Jeff Road. They were running out of supplies and that was why they had been marching south.

Zach conferred with the others, but knew that they were going to have to leave them, wounded or not. There were a few half-hearted suggestions, but the rest know what the score was and that they could not be bogged down with wounded.

The night took care of half their problem for them. One of the wounded, an elderly woman, died in the night of her wounds. They buried her in the clearing and Zach laid it out to the survivors. They could have the mounts, weapons and supplies from the reavers, but they could not go with them. He explained that the way west should be clear, but he could not guarantee it. They would have to take care of the wounded man as well as they could. “Our medic will leave you what supplies we can spare. You may find others in Sugartown. We didn’t take the time to bust into any of the buildings. I am really sorry, but that’s the way it has to be.”

## Chapter 15

### Sharp Resistance

*Winter 2049*

*Things haven't gone so badly, so far. This refurbishing of the buildings is really nuts. The slaves don't know if they are planning on reoccupying them or what. Leo thinks it is some kind of compulsion brought on by the drugs.*

*The fanaticism of the reavers is another strange thing. There is no military maneuvering, no tactics other than charge. They remind me of the Scots Highland Charge. These tactics probably work real well with isolated farms and villages, but against a well-trained force it is suicide. We have to get into a position where we can pull the reavers out of position, though I don't think that is really necessary, anymore. Its not like they will remain in any defensive positions, that I've seen. I can see them just charging straight ahead when they confront an enemy.*

*Time to get some sleep. There is going to be more contact and fighting the farther south we go.*

The column formed and set out to the east. When they had passed from the sight of the sorry band of survivors, Zach called a halt and brought the officers together for a conference. He spread out his map and pointed out, "We've made good time so far. But, if you look at the map, there are a lot of side roads to inspect and we need to be in Oakdale tomorrow or the next day.

"I suggest that we keep going on 112 until the bend near Elizabeth, where West Bay Road meets it. When we get there, we send Seventh Rangers to look over the town. If they don't see anything, we head south for five or so miles, then strike due east for Oakdale.

“The other column will be using SR10, which goes through Elizabeth, to get to Oakdale. They can cover that area.”

They traced their proposed route to Oakdale. Two Wolves suggested that they split their forces and cover more of the back roads. Further study of the map showed that there were too many places where they would be dangerously separated and the idea was abandoned.

They started off again and made the junction in an hour and a half. Harry took Seventh Troop and continued towards Elizabeth. The rest of the column spread out and rested. Fifteen minutes later Harry was back, looking grim.

“There’s a big ol’ work party in Elizabeth. Some three hundred workers and about sixty guards,” he reported.

“Crap,” ejaculated Leo.

“Exactly,” added Zach. “If we attack them they are just going to start killing the prisoners. Damn.”

Two Wolves pointed out, “We can leave them and the other column will be by in a day or two.”

Matt, who had come up when Harry returned, said, “We can’t wait here, Zach, there’s too much chance of them finding us. If we move to back then the other column could stumble into them. We could send a couple of rangers to intercept them, though.”

“Good idea, Matt,” complimented Leo. “Harry, do you have a couple of rangers you think can get through to the other column? It will be a bitch of a trip.”

“Yeah, that’s not the problem. The problem is Elizabeth,” answered Harry. He knew that Leo considered anyone not trained by him personally to be incompetent, but Harry knew the worth of his rangers. “I’ll send three from the Seventh out now.”



He left to issue his orders. The rest waited until he returned before anyone proposed a plan. “As I see it,” said Two Wolves, “we can mount an attack and take them, but it’s the prisoners we have to worry about. At night, the prisoners are isolated, aren’t they?”

Leo explained about the prisoners being locked up in a sealed up building at night.

“Then we have to wait for night,” observed Two Wolves.

“These guys will still start shooting into the prisoners’ building when we attack. Unless they put them in a brick or stone building, the walls won’t stop a bullet. Harry, were there any brick buildings?” asked Matt.

“Sure, the bank is one and there are a couple of others. The biggest ones.”

When Matt hesitated Zach encouraged him to continue. He took a deep breath and asked, “Harry, where is their camp?”

Harry cleared a spot in the dust. With a stick he drew a rough map of the town. “Here at the northern end is a street heading southwest. After a long block it takes a right turn for a block and then a left back southwest. The reaver camp is in that bend.”

“Thanks,” said Matt. “What I was thinking, we wait until dark and find where the prisoners are held and if there are guards in with them. We could send the Seventh on a wide swing, starting now and they could be in place well before dark, coming in from the east.

“Then, at say, two in the morning, when the camp is sure to be asleep, we move in. The ground isn’t hilly, but it isn’t flat, either. We could send Two Wolves with some men along this creek bed to the south of town. There’s a good chance they won’t be seen. They could be ready by dark, too.

“Proud of his Horses could take another group up Alligator Creek and move south after dark. The rest of us fan out and move in against the camp. At two, the Seventh could put

themselves between the camp and the prisoners. We hit the camp and finish them off, or something,” he finished lamely.

“Not a bad plan,” said Harry, “but I think that we should have more than just the Seventh. I say add the Thirteenth and ten or so of Two Wolves’ people.” The other nodded.

Zach looked over the map and added, “Rather than have Two Wolves go up your creek, Matt, how about using Mill Creek? They could wait at this road until it was almost time to attack, then move up and have them in the flank.”

The other agreed with the changes and the Seventh, Thirteen and a dozen Sioux were sent out immediately under Harry’s command. The rest of the troops, other than the sentries, were ordered to rest.

Zach couldn’t sleep and kept making the rounds of the sentries until Leo told him to stop because he was making everyone antsy. “Just nervous, I guess, Leo,” he said and forced himself to lie down.

Just before dark, Two Wolves and Proud of his Horses moved out. Zach thought of how much out of touch they all would be, depending on everything to be in place by two in the morning and none of the movement being spotted by an alert reaver.

The troopers ate and checked their weapons. Zach made sure that his marksmen had fresh silencers in their weapons. His group was to take the point and start the action by taking out the sentries. He moved his men out while it was still light enough to see. He knew how tricky it was shooting with infrared scopes and he wanted to try and spot the sentries posts before it got dark.

They found a slight rise topped with a small clump of trees. Several of the pines had been felled for firewood and the unused trunks formed a bulwark.

The reavers fed the prisoners and then moved them back to town for the night. The reavers assembled and ate and had some kind of meeting before they broke up and formed small groups around fires. Sentries were placed, but there was a lack of discipline among them. Most sat against a convenient rock or tree and Zach knew that they would be asleep when the attack started.

With hand signals, he indicated which man would take which sentry. When he was sure they understood, he motioned to them to get some rest. He could not sleep and took watch himself. Over the next few hours, the reavers turned in. There was a change of guard at midnight, but the new men immediately sat or lay down and were asleep in minutes.

At 1:30 in the morning, Zach woke up the men with a light touch. He had heard the whisper of the rest of the attacking force coming up behind him. With slower and slower turns, his second hand crawled around his watch. Finally, at 1:55, he took aim at his target and fired. The man jerked and settled quietly back. The rest of the marksmen fired and their targets sighed into death. Only one of the sentries was not killed immediately, but two backup shots nailed him before he was able to raise a cry of alarm.

Zach turned his flashlight to the rear and gave two quick bursts of light. He and his men moved down the rise and entered the camp. Most of the reavers were in tents. His men waited until the rest of the attacking force had come up, including the Sioux from the north and south.

After what seemed a lifetime, the attackers were in position and they opened fire. The night was ripped with the automatic rifle fire and the tents were shot to rags. Very few of the reavers even woke up, though a couple were able to get out of their tents. These were shot down before they could bring weapons to bear.

It was over in minutes, the quiet almost jarring after the crescendo of noise. Zach looked around at the torn bodies and shredded tents. He heard a trooper call out in horror, “There’s girls here, too.” He looked up as two shots barked. Two Wolves shrugged and walked away from the reaver he had just killed.

Harry walked up with the Seventh in a skirmish line behind him. He put a hand on Zach’s shoulder and said, “The prisoners are safe. We checked and there were no booby traps on the building.”

Zach looked up as if waking from a dream, “Thanks. Calm them down, will you?”

Harry nodded and walked off in the direction of Main Street.

The attackers were standing around in a daze. They were in the letdown period when hours of waiting were capped by a few minutes of action. It was as if the action was over too soon; they had not used up all the energy and anticipation that had been pent up.

Leo suddenly shouted, “All right now, start collecting weapons! Matt Busby, get your boys out there on guard duty. I want a perimeter a hundred yards out, understand? The rest of you, start moving the bodies over to the far side of the field. Move it, people, move it.”

Coming out of their daze, the men started to move. Matt called to his men together and assigned them sentry posts. Two Wolves and Michael O’Malley, of the Thirteenth, started their men collecting weapons or bodies. Zach grabbed a group of men and had them collect wood for the fires.

When the fires were built up, Leo had Michael and his troop get coffee and a meal started. O’Malley dug through the supply wagon and found sacks of rice and beans, along with some Cajun spices. He had water going within minutes.

Harry came back and reported, “We got the prisoners calmed down, almost had a riot. When we told them that we killed off all the reavers, one woman went nuts and ran off shouting, ‘you killed my son’ or something to that effect. A couple of the boys chased her but she disappeared.”

He indicated a small man standing to one side, “That John Smith. He’s called the Head Gang Boss. Said he wants to talk to you.”

Harry gestured the man over. He was a wizened little man with sparse white hair. His gnarled hands hung at his side and he nodded to Zach.

“Mr. Smith,” Zach said, extending his hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Smith looked surprised and a slow smile spread across his face. He took Zach’s hand and pumped it. “Been a long time since anyone call me Mister. Good to meet you.”

Smith looked around and saw the activity. “You rightly did take those boys out,” he said. “What gonna happen to us?”

“You, Mr. Smith, are free to go.”

“Pshaw. Where we gonna go? Them painted monkeys will kill us quick as scat, they catch us.”

“You’re right there. About the only safe place for you is to the west. The Texans will take you in. South, well, that’s where the reavers are. North, there’s more reavers there, but different. I don’t know what’s to the east. However, in the morning, you and your people can take 112 west. That’s the road we came in on and we cleared it of any reavers we found.”

“Reavers? What’s ‘reavers’?”

“Oh, it’s what we call the scavengers and looters. I don’t even know who used the word first or what it really means. What do you call these people?”

John Smith laughed. “We calls them ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’. But, they calls themselves ‘The Chosen’. With capitals, ‘The Chosen’. I don’t know who chose them, myself.”

Zach realized that the man could and would talk all night, so he asked, “Is there anything your people need, Mr. Smith? Food, medicine, whatever?”

“We could do with some cooking. The monkeys don’t feed us good. We not et a full meal since I don’t know when.”

“Well, my men are making some pots of beans and rice, if that’s all right with you.”

“My now, beans and rice would be right nice. I got a couple of the best cooks around for beans and rice. Let me get them for you all.” He hurried away towards town and returned a few minutes later with a huge man with a scraggly beard and a beaming smile and a pencil thin, tall woman.

Smith led them over to the fire and they nudged the cooks away from the kettles and began arguing about what kind of spices to use for red beans and rice. The man’s rich, fruity voice booming out over the woman’s sharp contralto.

The little man returned to Harry and Zach chuckling. “Those two will argue till dawn, but the food will be right. You just rest easy, Frannie and Papa Dick will have those boys of yours whipped into shape in no time. First thing you know, Frannie will have them cleaning up the dishes.”

Sure enough, a huge pot was set over a fire and filled with water. All the dishes and utensils were dumped in and some soap added. “You know, them dishes were warshed last night after supper. That Frannie, she thinks dirt sneak up on dishes when she not looking”.

Leo and Two Wolves joined them and they questioned Smith. He told them that the band they were with was in charge of the repairing of the towns and farms north of US190. The

smaller bands had been split off the week before. When asked why they were doing all the work in the buildings, John could tell them nothing. “We refuse to be part of The Chosen. We don’t take that drug, so they don’t tell us nothin’. We jus’ slaves. It somethin’ to do with that book they always talkin’ about.”

Further questioning revealed that there were no other bands this far north. The main concentration of reavers was around Lafayette. They kept raiding out farther and farther to get recruits for their army. It seems that the drug drives them to a berserk frenzy and they think nothing of their own safety, just killing whatever enemy they faced. Two years prior, they had cleared everybody to the Mississippi River. They had cleaned up the building and then moved north last year.

While they were cleaning up the buildings there, they started ‘cleansing’ to the west. Smith indicated that their objective was to create a huge buffer area around Lafayette of several hundred miles.

When they could get no more information out the wizened little man, Zach went over the situation again. “Did you talk to your people? What do they want to do?”

Smith said that some of them were for going back to the homes from which they were taken, others wanted to head west to Texas. The real concern was that there might be more of The Chosen around and how the travelers could defend themselves.

Zach and Leo assured them that they could have the supplies, horses and weapons of the reavers, though that meant only about a hundred would be armed with either a rifle or pistol. Two Wolves advised them to pack up quickly and head west as soon as possible.

By this time it was dawn and the food was ready. Papa Dick began banging on a pot to call them for breakfast. Smith went back to town to bring in the prisoners and the troops lined up.

Frannie reached into the hot water and took out a tin plate and a spoon or fork. She dipped them into a pot of rinse water and thrust them to a hapless trooper who had been shanghaied to be her assistant. The trooper dried them and handed them to the next trooper in line. The troopers face fell when the prisoners began to line up, but every ten or so people, Frannie would shove the old helper into line and grab another.

Matt brought several plates, balanced on his arms like a professional server. When Zach took his first bite, he thought his mouth was on fire. Sweat beaded his forehead and he gasped for air. The others had much the same reaction.

Smith joined them with a heaping plate and began to dig in. "This shore be good," he said, shoveling beans and rice into his mouth. "Warm the blood, it do."

The rest of the circle took tentative bites and Two Wolves said, "Warms something."

When they had finished, Frannie walked over. She had a persimmon look on her face and asked how it was. Zach got the impression that any criticism would be met with a whack of the wooden spoon she carried like a scepter.

Smith patted her leg and got his hand whacked. "You wanna touch something, you old buzzard, you touch ownself." He chuckled and shook his hand.

Zach looked up at the woman looming over him. "Well, ma'am, it was tasty, though a little more spice than I'm used to."

Suddenly, her face broke into a smile that lit up her eyes. "Well, thank you kindly, sir. I do appreciate a man who knows cookin'." She took the dishes and dumped them into the pot of freshly boiling water. She grabbed a trooper who happened by and set him to washing up. He was joined by a young girl prisoner she picked at random. Two middle-aged women joined them to rinse and dry.



Zach had John Smith use his people to dig a mass grave for the reavers. They lay them in the burial trench and covered them with the fabric from the tents. Zach was amazed at the amount of tattooing from the leader, who had her whole body covered with ink in the form of a raccoon, including a tail on the back of her right leg. Others had less ink, from a few lines to being nearly covered. They were all of either forests or animals. Though he asked, Smith could not explain the reason for the body art.

Leo said a few words over the grave.

Harry sent out a group of Sioux and Thirteenth Rangers as scouts and the expedition set out southeast until they reached West Bay Road and followed it to Bay City Road. There they struck south until they reached Old Oakdale Road.

They took a short break and Zach called for a meeting of the leaders of the column. He looked at them and said, "Gentlemen, one of the reasons we are here is to pull the reavers from the south and get them out of position. The only problem is, they don't know we are here. Unless they miss the clean-up bands and investigate, there is no way for them to really know that there are forces up here.

"The reavers we met have had only one thought in mind, to kill us. Usually, in a battle, the weaker forces will retreat, but these are a new breed of animal.

"What I think we should do, is to force them to notice us."

"How would we do that, Zach," Two Wolves asked.

"By burning one of their little projects. Generate a lot of smoke. They would, at least, send a force to put out the fire."

"Okay," said Harry. "Where does this pyromaniacal event take place?"

“At Oakdale, I guess. It’s along the railroad. I figure there are old ties or we can rip them from the rail bed. Creosote will generate a lot of dark smoke that will be seen for miles.”

Leo spoke up asking, “Shouldn’t we be more south? Smith said that there are barracks along US90 at Kinder and Eunice and Dequincy. If we set the fire at Oberlin, they would be sure to see it.”

“I agree with you as far as seeing the smoke goes, but we want them to be more than five miles from their bases. The second column will be moving along that road and I want the reavers really out of position.”

Leo conceded the point and they agreed to set the signal at Oakdale. They got the men up and moved east along Old Oakdale Road until it turned into Old Main Line Road and followed that into Oakdale.

They had not seen anyone down the side roads. Oakdale, which they approached cautiously, was also empty of reavers. Outside of town, at the rail yard, they found a large pile of replacement ties. Harry led the Seventh Rangers in a reconnaissance of the town, but found no one. He had the men break into a grocery store and found it fully stocked with canned goods.

“It was weird,” he reported. “It was like they were ready to open up again. I guess, when they spread out with more population, they will. There are no dry goods, like flour, sugar, beans and such, but there is about everything with a container.”

Zach ordered the rest of the buildings searched. He cautioned them against wanton destruction. One of the troopers asked if they could take ‘souvenirs’ and Zach answered, “As long as you can carry it and still march and fight, then I have no problem, but, again, I don’t want to see or hear a lot of breaking. These towns are in shape to be occupied and, when this is over, the slaves we are freeing will want them to be that way when they take over.”

Two Wolves said something in Sioux to his followers. He turned to the others and said, “I told them I would shoot the first man to cause problems.”

“Was that a good idea, Zach?” asked Harry.

“Probably not, but the men need to let off a little steam and I don’t think there is too much to loot, anyway. We’ll see.

“Now, I’m going to take a squad from One Troop and head for Oberlin. You were right, Leo. If they don’t see the smoke, then we have to start another fire in Oberline, actually burn down a farm or something. If we just burn another set of ties, they might be suspicious that it was only a diversion.”

He let the scavenging go on for an hour then ordered the groceries stripped of food and the building boarded up again. A quick inspection showed nothing more than a few broken windows and display cases.

Matt assigned Andrew Chruchill and Jimmy Bronski’s squad to accompany Zach. They set off down SR165. He told Harry to give them two hours before setting fire to the ties.

He held them to a quick march and let them rest at Ward for fifteen minutes. They were still several miles from Oberlin when the two hours were up. Zach looked back and saw a thin spire of smoke, which rapidly expanded and grew darker.

He knew immediately that it was not enough and he pushed on to Oberlin. They found a farm off Cottongin Road and, as Zach was preparing to fire it, one of the troopers called that there was a column of reavers on the road. Zach called his men back to a copse of trees that overlooked the road.

It was a good defensive position, but Zach was under no illusion that they could handle more than a small squad of the enemy.

“How did they get here so fast?” asked Andrew.

Zach shook his head and whispered for silence. The reaver column, number around two hundred men, exited the town and broke into a trot. Zach waited for any stragglers and then ordered the troopers to parallel the road and get back to Oakdale as quickly as possible.

“What’s going to happen when they get to Oakdale, the reavers, I mean?” asked one of the troopers.

“Hopefully, they will be ready. Double hopefully,” continued Jimmy, “the other column will have arrived.”

Zach told them to save their breath and keep marching.

An hour later, they heard faint gunshots and the chatter of a machine gun. Though the troopers were near exhaustion, Zach pushed them hard. He was feeling a sharp stitch in his side and he didn’t know how long he could keep up.

He was ready to order the troop on and drop out, when they heard a clatter of hooves on the road. They quickly advanced to the road and prepared to ambush the returning reavers. When the riders came in sight, they recognized Two Wolves and his men.

The weary troops stood and waved the Sioux down. Two Wolves jumped from his horse and slapped Zach on the back. “Man, we were worried about you. Thought maybe the reavers got you.

“It was a good fight, Zach. We caught them at the edge of the woods. They rode right into it. Nailed their hides to the barn door.”

Zach sank onto a convenient stump by the side of the road. “Just like that?” he asked.

“Well, not just like that. We let them get into the meadow then opened up. They charged immediately. Not a bit of panic or hesitation. It was spooky.

“The ones left after the first volley spread out in a line and charged, firing from the saddle. They nearly got to the train station before the last one dropped.”

Zach took a drink from a proffered canteen and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Any casualties?” he asked.

“Fourteen. Six dead. One pretty bad head wound, the rest weren’t hit bad.” Two Wolves continued, “The other column came up right after you left. Our rangers gave us plenty of warning and we set up the machine guns from the trucks to cover the killing ground.

“It was too bad, but they didn’t have a chance.”

“Who did we lose?”

“Three wounded from your One Troop and one killed. I lost two with three more wounded. The Arkansas Rangers had one killed and one wounded and the Arkansas Troop had three wounded, one was the head wound.”

Zach stood. “Let’s get back,” he said.

The Sioux had brought extra horses and the troopers mounted up. They rode back to Oakdale and were challenged by a sentry. Two Wolves answered with the countersign and they passed through the picket line.

“That was one of the Arkansas Rangers. Did you notice the green shirt? That’s kind of their uniform,” Two Wolves pointed out.

When Zach returned, a meeting of the combined columns was held. Zach asked Ralph Meeker to bring them up to date on what happened to them. He reported that they had crossed the river at the north end of the reservoir and found the cache from Jason and Adam’s directions. They loaded the trucks with the most essential weapons and supplies and were ready to burn the

rest when William Campbell, the head driver, insisted that they could get the whole thing in two loads and he would like to try.

They finally compromised on leaving two volunteer troopers from Twenty-one to guard the cache and set it off if any reavers showed. The trucks, with the rest of Twenty-one Troop guarding it, headed back to the border.

The rest of the column followed SR10 towards Oakdale. They encountered one band of reavers at Sugrue, which was a couple of buildings at the crossroads. It looked like a hunting party. They had a wagon, four prisoners and six reavers. When the reavers saw the column, they killed the prisoners and charged the party.

“Both of us were kind of surprised. They got off a couple of shots before we wiped them out. Those bastards are crazy,” said Meeker shaking his head. “They got a couple of my men. From then on, I can tell you, we were more careful.

“Cravens, another crossroads, was burned to the ground, Pitkin was sealed up real nice, as was Dido. We saw you had some trouble at Elizabeth. We saw the grave.

“Well, we got here just before the reavers did and you know the rest. Question is, what are we going to do now?”

Zach stood over the map and traced a line to Washington. “We can go here and take I-49 south to Lafayette, for one thing.” He moved his finger and traced another line down SR13 to Eunice. “There’s another bunch of reavers here.”

Ralph jabbed a finger at Mamou, Louisiana. “Do you think we could set up another ambush there? We could set another big fire and nail them, too,” he said, excitedly.

Zach looked at the tough, lean Arkansawyer with a smile. “My thoughts exactly. We take out this garrison and we have eliminated two strong forces. Now, I’m sure that somebody is left at Kinder, but there can’t be too many.

“If we can do the same thing to Eunice’s garrison, we can head east, take SR31 to I-10 and then swing east to Lafayette and hit them from the rear. Lamont should be at the front door by then.”

The rest of the council agreed to the plan. Now that there were enough horses from the reavers or room in the pickups, they made Mamou in a matter of hours and laid out their ambush for the morning.

## Chapter 16

### The Finale

*Winter 2049*

*Our casualties have been surprisingly light, so far. I don't think these reavers have every faced organized opposition before. Their only mindset is charge and kill. Their tactics are take the civilian population and suborn them into the military with drugs or use them as slaves to fix up the towns. I really am curious about that and the reason for it.*

*The boys are ready for tomorrow. If this goes like Oakdale, we will get another two hundred. Lamont said he thought there were only two thousand total. That means that, so far, they have lost around two hundred and eighty something, almost fifteen percent. Counting my chickens before they hatch, tomorrow night could see a quarter of the reavers taken care of.*

*I wonder how the Kinder group got word about us. Someone must have told them. I wonder if it was that woman who ran off at Oakdale. She was ranting about her son getting killed, but I thought she was just nuts. What son would stand for seeing his mother treated like a slave? Maybe, the drug makes them not care. I wonder what it is. We destroyed all that we found at Oakdale. I didn't even want to take a sample back to be tested. That stuff scares me!*

*Usually, I ignore the question unless it impairs a man's ability to do a job. If someone is dumb enough to take recreational drugs, on his or her head be it. But this stuff is downright mind altering. Personality changes, values are gone, everything changes.*

*Anyway, the only explanation I can think of is that old woman told them.*



*I wonder how the other columns are doing. They've had one day of operations and Lake Charles was their first goal. I hope the tanks are able to punch holes through the reavers. I can just see them coming on in waves.*

*Time to get some sleep. I hope Sarah and the kids are well. I don't know what I would do if something happened to them.*

Harry took the Seventh Rangers down the road towards Eunice. They were to watch for the reavers.

An hour later, the fire was lit and some roofing shingles were thrown on the make smoke. A small group of reavers passed Harry an hour later. He sent one of the rangers back to tell them of the small band, but kept his station, waiting for a larger band.

Two hours after the first group passed, a column of a hundred and fifty to a hundred and seventy-five galloped by the spot. Harry and his men raced back to Mamou and alerted the troops. The first, smaller band had been easily eliminated and all sign of their passing had been cleared away.

True to form, the reavers rode in column up the road. Zach's marksmen opened up a long range, emptying saddles with each volley. The reavers spread out and charged. The machine guns began firing and then the troops joined in. Horses and reavers tumbled and dropped.

The reavers fired their weapons as they charged. A trooper dropped, and then several other men were down. The charge lasted for a bare hundred yards before the last reaver was down. Several reavers were crawling forward, one fired a wild shot. Zach and his marksmen took care of the moving reavers.

They still waited almost an hour before cautiously advancing. One reaver, pinned by his horse with his stomach ripped open, stared at them defiantly and bit down on something in his mouth. His head dropped to the road. "Suicide," said Two Wolves.

Harry took the Seventh back down the road and the rest collected the weapons and usable gear. Wounded horses were put down and the tack removed. The men looted the dead of anything they wanted. The weapons were placed in the pickups with those from the previous ambush. With the mounts captured from the latest ambush, all the troopers were mounted.

The saddles and equipment which could not be carried along were stored in a building on the outskirts of town. The bodies were left where they fell.

Within an hour, the column was mounted and moving towards Eunice. Harry's Rangers formed a skirmish line ahead of the column and they arrived at the outskirts of Eunice by noon.

They set up their ambush point at De Jean Road. When they were ready, the Arkansas Rangers rode towards town. When they reached Lawyer Road, they began firing towards the town. Within minutes, riders appeared and spurred towards them.

The first ragged bunch, were handled by the rangers. When a larger band rode out of town, the rangers spurred north. The reavers followed them, howling their rage and hatred.

The column opened up and the reavers fell in windrows. The next wave met the same fate. A dozen were left as the last wave, but rather than attacking, they reversed their mounts and rode for town.

"They are going to kill the civilians," shouted Ralph Meeker. His words started a general charge towards town, led by the Arkansas contingent. Zach, Leo, Harry and the troop leaders tried to stop them and managed to get their own men under control. Zach railed at them for their lack of discipline. He spread the men out and, with the handful of Sioux that piled up behind his

men when they halted, they rode into town. Street by street they moved. Any civilians they found, they encouraged to leave town and form out by the rail yards where the track bent. He assigned Seventh Rangers to escort the first batch and guard the area. They were to use the MG trucks and form a perimeter.

They heard occasional shots and screams. A reaver leapt from a second story window onto a trooper's mount. She had a knife in her hand, but before she could do more than wound the trooper, the horse shied and threw the reaver to the ground. As she got to her feet, a dozen shots ripped through her and smashed her to the ground.

They didn't search the buildings, but listened for screams. That usually meant that a reaver was attacking a civilian. The troopers responded by surrounding the block, if possible and sending a half dozen men into the building. Sometimes they caught the reaver in his or her murderous rage, other times they killed them as they exited a building.

Their main effort was to get the civilians out of town. They herded them down the streets, alert for reavers.

Meeker thought they got the last reaver about nightfall, but they waited until morning to make another, organized sweep of the town. They found several more civilians, but no more reavers. The Arkansawyers and Sioux were hangdog about their lack of discipline. They had lost nine men between them.

Zach spoke to the civilians. He told them that they would only be safe as far from this road as possible. He turned over the weapons to the gang bosses and told them to take what they needed and head for Oakdale. "You can hole up there or head for Texas. The grocery stores seem to be stocked with canned goods, so you won't have trouble with food, but don't hesitate. We'll stay until you gather what you need and start north.

“Please, don’t take anything but food, weapons, clothing and camp gear.”

The townspeople scattered and Zach gave them an hour to get ready. At the end of that time, he sent in troopers to call that they were leaving. At the end of another half hour, a ragged band of refugees was moving north.

Zach led his men east along SR190. The town of Opalouzas had a small force of reavers that were easily taken care of. The civilians were started north on I-49 and told to take SR106 across to SR10. They could follow that into Oakdale and use SR120 to get to Texas.

Riding with abandon, Zach led his men down SR31 to I-10. They did not encounter any more reavers and he ordered a rest just north of Beaux Bridge. Leo took his son Daniel and one other ranger he had trained and made a scout of Lafayette. They returned several hours later.

“There’s shooting off to the west. The town’s a beehive. The reavers are headquartered at the university. From what I could see from the church steeple, here, they are forming for one last charge. I think Lamont is coming down this street, here. West Congress. From what I saw, there’s another group coming up Johnston Street and another moving down Cameron.

“Looks like the reavers are pretty well boxed in. They’re howling like banshees down there.”

Zach looked around at his officers. “I want to take the university intact. What I want is that Book of Rules. We are going hell bent down I-10, cutting south on I-49 and ride for the university. I want One Troop with me to take the admin building. The rest charge on through and hit the reavers.

“I figure the reavers will be go after the other column and we can get into the university, secure their main building while the rest of you hit the reavers from the rear.”

The others nodded. They grimly mounted and started for town. They turned onto I-49 and rode south to Jefferson Street. From Jefferson, they turned onto Congress and increased their pace to a gallop. Except for the click of their horses' hooves echoing off the building, there was no noise. When they reached University Avenue, they swung south until they reached the turn to Martin Hall. The column turned past the brick columns and Zach, Leo and One Troop charged around the circular drive to the front steps of the massive brick pile.

Two Wolves ordered his men to surround the building and the rest of the column charged across the Walk of Honor towards the sound of battle.

Zach, Matt, Leo and a dozen troopers charged up the stairs and slammed into the front doors. They were stopped by the locked doors and the furniture jammed to keep the door barred. Zach called for a ram and a bench from nearby was hauled up by troopers and Sioux.

Zach and the rest stepped back to let them have room to swing. The bench slammed into the doors, shattering the panes of glass. Before they had a chance to swing again, a massive explosion blew out the doors and collapsed the balcony, throwing the members of the expedition down the stairs.

Zach was out for only a few seconds. He tried to stand. It took him two tries before he got unsteadily to his feet. He looked at the building and saw it was crisscrossed with cracks and the roar of the fire was like a furnace gone wild. Zach shook his head to help clear it and saw a Sioux lying in the steps, his left leg at an odd angle. His jeans were soaked with blood and his body was a red smear from the flying glass.

Zach stumbled to the weakly struggling man and reached for him. His arm felt funny and, when he looked at it, his forearm was dangling half-way along. It took him a few seconds to realize that the arm was broken. He was bothered by something covering his eye. He brushed

it away with his left hand and discovered the hand was covered in blood. Dropping his head, he stared at his shirt and wondered why it was red. He shut his eyes and, again, shook his head.

When he opened his eyes, he saw large, slow drops of red landing at his feet.

He was roused from his reverie by the plea for help from the man at his feet. He reached out his left hand and they grasped wrists. All Zach could manage to do was drag the hurt Sioux across the parking lot and away from the danger of the building's collapse.

Dropping the Indian's wrist he turned back to towards the building and took an unsteady step before a hand grabbed him and saved a fall. He looked at his savior and saw Daniel, shirt in ribbons and his chest covered in small, oozing cuts.

"Zach. Zach! ZACH!" he shouted, tears streaming down his dust-coated face. "It's dad. Over here."

He turned Zach towards a tree under which Leo lay. His left side was covered with blood and a two foot section of the door frame was sticking out of his side. The medic was working on him, trying to stop the blood.

Josh Blaine turned to look at them when they approached. He had a gash in his left cheek and a crude bandage was tied around his left arm. "He needs a doctor, bad, Dan" he said.

"I'll get one," said Zach turning and almost falling down. Two Wolves, the usual grin gone from his face, caught him and eased him to the ground next to Leo.

"Take care of Zach," he said to Daniel and Josh. "I'll ride for a doctor." He crossed to a trembling horse and vaulted into the saddle. He was gone around the side of the building and towards the west end of town. Josh ordered Daniel to get something to use as a splint and took out a bottle of peroxide and a cloth from his medical bag. While Appleton hurried off, he began wiping the blood from Zach's face. Fortunately for Zach, he passed out soon after Josh began.

By the time he came around, his wound had been bandaged and his arm set. A woman was bending over Leo. She had gray hair and a no nonsense manner. She was ordering the troopers and Sioux around like a Sergeant-Major on parade.

Zach croaked to her to ask, “How is he?” She gave him a withering look and snapped, “Alive, barely, but his chances will not improve if I am constantly interrupted with stupid questions.”

Zach looked around and saw that the area had been turned into a field hospital. As he struggled to his feet, the doctor asked him where he thought he was going. He slowly turned to her and answered, pointing to Leo, “His chances won’t improve if you keep asking stupid questions.” He immediately regretted taking his feelings out on her and mumbled an apology as he turned away.

The building was still burning, the façade having collapsed. The interior of the building could be seen and the cupola, surprisingly, was still in place, though leaning precariously. As Zach surveyed the damage, a figure appeared in a top story window. He broke the window and shouted something to the crowd below. All activity had ceased and they were staring at the man, except for the doctor.

His words were snatched away by the draft from the fire. Finally, his oration finished, he leapt headfirst to the ground, hitting it with the sound of a sack of wheat. Zach stumbled over to the body. It was of a middle-aged man, covered with tattoos of many different animals. His light blue eyes had faded and a trickle of blood trailed from his mouth. Zach ordered a nearby trooper to bring a blanket and cover the body, but not to disturb it.

At that moment, the Hall collapsed into itself with a roar. Zach knew that the famous Book of Rules had been destroyed in the fire and, probably, the equipment to make the drug. He wondered if he would ever find the answer to the question of why they repaired the buildings.

He walked, slowly, back to the field hospital and found the doctor rolling down her sleeves. Zach started to speak, but closed his mouth when he remembered her vinegarish answer last time.

She looked at him with a tight smile. "I got the bleeding stopped and the sliver out of him. I sewed him up and gave him some antibiotics and morphine. Any more questions you have, you can ask God." With that, she picked up her bag and moved to another patient.

When Zach turned, he saw Two Wolves looking at him with a lopsided grin. "If she is as good a doctor as her bedside manner is bad, she could cure by the laying on of hands."

After a last glance at Leo, sleeping under the tree, Zach joined him and slumped to the grass. "What a mess. What's the count?"

"We were lucky, actually. The two men carrying the front of the bench took most of the blast and glass. They were killed instantly. One of yours and one of mine. The men behind were thrown down the stairs. The furniture piled in front of the door took a lot of the blast.

"By-the-way, thanks for dragging Yellow Bird out of the way. There were a lot of injuries from flying glass, but most of the rest of the men on the porch were protected by the building. I don't think anyone who was at the front or back of the main section of the building was free from damage. Mostly cuts and such from glass and debris.

"Leo took the worst wound. He got a chunk of door molding through the gut. One of mine, Spotted Horse, was his by the flying bench and the doc says that the side of his head is like jelly. See what I mean about bedside manner? Anyway, she doesn't hold out much hope for



him. Too bad, he was a good kid. I was grooming him to take over when I retire to the Bahamas.”

A group of horsemen rode into the area. They were silhouetted by the sun. Wearily, John Lamont got down, followed by the others. Karl went over to see Leo and, when he looked the question at Zach, he shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the sky.

The rest crowded around Zach and Two Wolves. They sat wearily down and just stared at the rubble for a few minutes. When Karl joined them, the malaise seemed to be broken and John sighed and stretched his back. He had a bandage covering his left ear and there were dark circles under his eyes.

He looked at Zach and said, “We got all that we could find. Didn’t capture a one of them. Once we figured out how to fight them, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Get close, fire a few shots and pretend to run. They would chase us every time. It was a slaughter.” He hawked and spat.

“Yeah,” agreed Zach. “We found that out, too. They would charge Hell with a bucket of water, up to a point. If they were near civilians, though, the last of them would turn on them with a frenzy. We had that happen at Eunice.”

John rubbed his eyes in weariness. “Yeah, well, the first brush taught a few things. We tried to meet them south of Lake Charles when they ambushed us. They swarmed over the tanks. We were afraid to fire, but were forced to when they started banging on the hatches. Paul had buttoned up the view slits, so all they got was a headache from the noise.”

“Sounded like we were inside an anvil and someone was hitting it with a sledge,” grinned Paul.

John snorted his amusement. “When they couldn’t open up the tanks, they swarmed after us. There were almost three hundred of them. Most of them we shot down before they reached us, the rest we fought them hand-to-hand. We took a lot of casualties until we annihilated them. We lost twenty-eight killed and sixty wounded, twelve badly enough to be out of it. How many did you lose, Raph?”

Raphael nodded to Zach and replied, “Twelve dead, eighteen wounded.”

John continued, “Next time, though, outside Jennings, we sent the tanks in and they fired a few shots and backed off. Sure enough, the reavers left their positions and charged after them. What those the tanks didn’t get, we did. Didn’t lose but two men, that time. I don’t think Raph lost any.” He looked at Raphael, who nodded.

“We met Carl and his column just north of Crowley. He can tell you about his trouble. We joined forces and marched towards Lafayette. We had to leave one of the tanks, it broke down. It should be okay; I left a squad of Raphael’s men with it and the mechanics.

“We got to the edge of Lafayette before we encountered any more. This was a bunch of about three hundred. They took one look at us and charged. We cut down a lot of them and, just before they hit us, there was an explosion in town. They stopped and looked back. We were shooting them down all the time. They just ignored us and our firing sort of tailed off.”

John shivered as if someone had just walked across his grave. “When the smoke started to rise, they gave this God-awful cry and died. They must have bitten into those suicide pills, ‘cause they just started keeling over. Within minutes, they were all dead. Uncanny.”

Zach gestured towards the smoking rubble. “That was their capitol or temple or whatever. When we were about to break in, someone set off a huge charge and blew it up.”

Two Wolves turned to Carl. “What happened to you?”

“Us? We headed along SR90. We encountered our first opposition at Dequincy. There were about two hundred of them. They sprung their ambush early, so we had time to get set. The machine guns chopped them up pretty good. The last dozen or so hauled back to town and we took our time following them. I didn’t want to get into a street battle.

“When we got into town, it was a slaughterhouse. There were bodies everywhere. We heard some shooting east of town and we headed in that direction. As we passed through town, every once in a while, one of them would jump out and try to kill as many as they could before we got them. It was pretty nerve wracking, I can tell you.

“When we got to the edge of town, we saw a couple of them just shooting after the townspeople, who were running away. We killed them and caught up with the refugees. We told someone who called himself Big Gang Boss to arm his people with the weapons from the other side of town and clear the place out. Then we rode on.”

He stopped to take a drink of water. “Zach, I’m sorry. We lost eight going through the town. Five were dead. John Short lost two dead and one wounded.”

At Kinder, they just charged us and we wiped them out with no casualties. When we reached town, only three people were alive. They said they had hid when the killing started. We sent them back to Dequincy. Eunice was cleaned out of reavers. There were some civilians, but not many. They told us you guys,” he pointed to Zach and Two Wolves, “had been through. We found the bodies north of town.”

Carl shrugged and indicated John Lamont, “Then we joined John and the rest you know.”

Zach motioned for Two Wolves to tell their story. He lay back on the grass and closed his eyes. Somewhere along the way, he fell asleep.

He woke to the sun shining through the trees. He had a splitting headache and his arm ached. When he struggled to sit up, he found someone had covered him with a blanket. Squinting, he looked over at Leo. His sons were sitting by his side and he got to his feet and walked towards them.

They looked up as he approached. "He's doing better, though he has a fever." Gregg offered to get coffee and walked towards the field kitchen.

"Watch out for Doctor Sheridan, she wants to open up your forehead and make sure all the glass is out. Irrigate it, I think she said," Daniel told him.

Zach snorted. "Old Sheridan the Harridan can just irrigate the far side of the moon. I don't want her cutting me open. I don't even think she likes me that much."

"It does not matter what my feelings are for you," said a voice behind them. Doctor Sheridan had accompanied Gregg back. "Furthermore, Mr. Banducci, if I feel that there is a need to open you up and clean out debris, I will do so. If it takes a squad of Texas Rangers to do it, then so be it. And, Mr. Banducci, if you put me to that much trouble with your juvenile attitude, I will use a very dull scalpel."

Zach meekly submitted to the procedure, after she had checked on Leo. Despite her manner she had a delicate touch. She had him sewn back after picking several small pieces of glass from the wound. Handing him some aspirin, she walked away to arrange for Leo to be taken to the hospital being set up in Baker-Huger Hall.

## Chapter 17

### Home Again

*Summer/Fall 2049*

*Well, the drug reavers are finished. Thank God it went down like it did. I really was expecting hundreds of casualties. None of us took into account they would charge blindly into our guns. From what John Lamont said, they couldn't even stage a good ambush. I can't help but thinking what the Book of Rules contained and what was in the drug. What substance could do that to people? As curious as I am, however, I am glad we destroyed all supplies of the drug we found.*

*The Texans will help Louisiana set up a government and join the loose confederation that we are pretty much stumbling into.*

*Two Wolves and John Short weren't too upset when they were told they couldn't loot Lafayette. They and their men took it meekly, but I noticed they took I-49 at their route home. I wonder how many places were still closed up after they passed through. I understand that the towns and supplies in them belong to the Louisianans, but those guys fought and died so they could be freed from their servitude.*

*Raphael is confident that they can start moving back into Missouri and clean up the shattered reaver bands. They will be a long time rebuilding. I sincerely hope that the civilian population wasn't too badly decimated by the Reaver Wars. Well, Al Relgado, the governor, and his cabinet have pledged to help them, if they need it.*

*Leo is fully recovered. The fever seemed to linger on longer than the doctors expected, but he finally beat it. His sons say he has slowed down, though and favors that side.*

*Sarah has a new hobby. She thinks she is getting fat and soft, for some reason. Anyway, the ladies are all excited about Ballroom Dancing. To keep the peace, and sleep in our own beds, the husbands are 'enthusiastically' taking lessons, too.*

*Most of the troops have left. Leo and I are sitting here in the hospital being bored and playing cribbage. Hopefully, we will be released, soon.*

Weeks later, Leo was making a pest of himself. The fact of the matter was, he was bored. The rest of the expedition had returned to Texas and had, probably, departed for their homes. A few Texans were helping the Louisianans set up a government and defense force. Leo and a couple of other men were the only patients left.

The exasperated doctors finally discharged him, not so much because he was fit to travel, but because they were tired of hearing him complain. First Rangers and One Troop had been assigned to wait for him and Zach stayed behind because his head wound had gotten infected and he was weak from the fever.

Daniel, Jason and Gregg helped their father to dress and wheeled him out in a wheelchair they found at the local hospital. Zach had convinced William Campbell, Jr. to stay behind and convey Leo. Willing hands carried the wheelchair to the truck and it was secured with the clamps William had installed.

In the truck were a variety of 'souvenirs' and forty-two black powder rifle kits they had found in a closed up sporting goods store. The Louisianans had gladly made a gift of them to Jefferson in appreciation for the help in overcoming the reavers.

Daniel was tucking a blanket around Leo's knees and he slapped his hand and told him, "Leave be. What do you think, I'm crippled?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Daniel returned.

They set off slowly towards the west. Whenever Leo looked tired, they stopped and rested. Zach sat in the back with Leo on a rifle box covered with blankets and kept an eye on his friend. Leo's sons were always close by and, though he complained about being babied, it was obvious he appreciated it.

The trip to Ganado took almost a week. They passed through Beaumont and found it a bustling settlement. Some of the troops had moved north towards the Arkansas border to help with the 'normal' reavers. However, the threat of a large-scale invasion from them was over. The bands had broken up and were being eliminated by the Kansans and Arkansawyers. Though the large bands were shattered, the remainder of the reavers was still causing trouble and had penetrated as far as the Millwood Lake area.

They were planning on resting in Ganado for several days, but they were all restless to get home. The Texans had given the troopers mounts, pack horses and tack and they left the morning after they arrived. The trip to Palo Duro saw Leo gaining strength and at the canyon, he was declared fit to ride by Doctor Ahluwalia Singh, as long as Leo took it in easy stages.

They left the truck and rifles with Jasper Poole. They left with Ishtar Singh escorting them nearly to Trinidad. In time, they saw the Mound and Leo kicked him mount into a gallop to the Front Gate. His sons raced after him and Zach and the rest of the command found them at the guard post. Leo was bent over in the saddle and, when Zach rode up, said, "Now, that was pretty stupid."

At a more sedate pace, they rode into Mitchell. The troopers were dismissed to report to Carl at the barracks. Zach took Leo to the hospital. He was helping him from the saddle when the Appletons and the population from The Ranch came out to the porch.

Leo shook off Zach's hands and whispered, "Couldn't wait until we got home to give us Hell."

He managed to get up the stairs by himself, but Cathy and his daughters-in-law helped him inside. Adam and Sandra Silver followed them.

Zach mounted the stairs and greeted his children. Only when they had been taken away by the other wives, did Sarah approach him. With glistening eyes, she gently touched the angry red scar on his forehead. "It won't be one of your most endearing features," she said as she hugged him.

"Why does mommy cry when you come home?" asked Little Sarah.

Sarah laughed through her tears and knelt down to give her daughter a hug. "It's because I'm happy, you little monkey," she said.

"When I'm happy, I laugh," piped up Andy.

Everyone laughed and escorted Zach into the hospital. The doctor looked at his arm when he was finished with Leo and removed the cast, cautioning him to go easy with it for a few weeks.

The families retired to the restaurant for a celebratory dinner. Folks were constantly stopping by to wish them well and see how they were. Leo was obviously tired and they called it a day. Cathy had brought a wagon for Leo and he lay down on the mattress they had provided in the back. Surprisingly, he did not make his usual protest against be treated like a baby. Later, Cathy said he was asleep before they were out of town.

Two days later, Zach let the four older children drive a small herd of culls to town. Everyone else rode several hundred yards back. William rode proudly and was very serious about the job. Even the dogs who were herding the sheep, kept their distance.



While the animals were delivered to the slaughter yard, the adults stopped by the Commissary. William and his staff were scurrying around, but the big man, who had increased in girth in the years they had known him, came around the counter to talk with them. He took the tally of the cattle and sheep and the women began collecting clothing and supplies.

The men drifted down to the yards, dodging wagons of produce on the way. A farmers market had been set up in the town square and a brisk trade was going on. Fruits and vegetables were being purchased for drying and canning. Zach stopped by to see Alvin Young to order a load of produce for themselves and the Appletons. Alvin promised that his son, Winston, and Ed Wiley would bring it up in the morning.

They continued to the Pasture and picked up the boys and Elizabeth and gave each of them chits for the job. Whooping and hollering, they galloped towards town to spend their pay.

The slaughter pens were going full bore. Beef, mutton and hams were being salted or smoked or made into jerky. “Want to join them?” Zach asked the others.

“No,” said Karl, “I would rather get a beer.”

They laughed and rode back to the bar to wait for the wives and kids. Gail O’Malley followed them in and Zach had a sinking feeling. She marched up to their table and sat down.

“I thought you were going to try and save some of those unfortunates,”

“A good day to you, too, Grace,” said Zach a little irritated by her lack of greeting.

“Oh, yes, hello, I am sorry,” she said.

“As to your question, we didn’t have much chance to capture any of them. They either fought to the finish or killed themselves,” Zach continued. “I don’t think it would have done any good, anyway. They had one kid at Ganado and the doctors kept him drugged up and tried to

wean him off the drug, but the minute they stopped feeding him morphine, he had a seizure and died. The drug does something to them physically and mentally.

“The doctors said it was more addictive and damaging than that drug they used at the end of the last century. What was it, um, oh yeah, crack or crystal something.

“Anyway, just a few weeks of use and you have to keep taking it or die.”

Grace gave him an unbelieving look and refused Karl’s offer of a drink. He said when she left, “I like the woman, but she is too much a do-gooder. Thinks she can save everybody.”

They had another beer and were joined by their families. They loaded the purchases on the wagon and rode home. On the way, they spoke of the Thanksgiving celebration to be held in the Council Chambers after the harvest.

Three days after the Thanksgiving celebration, the temperature dropped and the first blizzard of the season hit. It lasted for three days and even the roaring fires did not keep all of the cold at bay. Icy finger worried around windows and doors and the snow piled deep.

When the storm broke, the Appleton boys came down to invite everyone for an ice skating party on the lake. They agreed to come the next day and the men took the wheels off three wagons and installed runners. Karl put heavy, studded shoes on the horses. The women cooked pies and cakes, which Jason assured them that Cathy needed. After chores the next morning, they bundled up and loaded up into the wagons.

By the time they got to the lake, everyone was chilled, even with the buffalo robes. They hurried to a huge bonfire that the Appletons had built by the lake and warmed themselves. Leo brought out skates and he and his sons and their wives gave lessons. The Parker girls were excellent skaters, even Rachel and Sandra who had learned while visiting cousins in Wisconsin when they were young.

Zach never got past the spread eagle stage and finally decided that he would have more fun drinking toddies by the fire. They broke for lunch and Leo got out hockey equipment. He passed out sticks and masks to everyone; even Zach was convinced to try the game.

The teams consisted of good skaters and beginners on each side. Zach ended up on the ice most of the time and finally ended up sliding his stick at the puck. Every time he did get up, one of the others took the opportunity to give him a nudge and watch him wave his arms trying to restore his balance. He was rarely successful and ended up on the ice.

The kids whooped and cheered every time he took a spill and he began making spectacular falls. On the last one, there was an ominous crack and he immediately fell back and spread his arms and legs to lessen the weight in any one spot. Leo herded the others off the ice and the men formed a chain, lying on the ice.

Zach grabbed Gregg's stick and was pulled to shore. He got up muttering, "Yeah, right. The ice is nice and thick."

Leo stage whispered to the kids, "The ice was thick, but the butt was thicker."

Zach turned at the giggling children and threatened, "Let's see how thick your heads are." He threw a snowball at Leo and started a free-for-all which ended only when the exhausted fighters were called into dinner.

They stayed that night and headed downhill in the morning to care for the stock. The Appletons were invited the following week for Christmas and agreed to come down after an early supper.

Christmas Eve was spent singing carols, eating, drinking eggnog and telling and reading Christmas stories. The children were allowed to open one present each. William was given a

new .30-06 Winchester to replace his old gun. He wanted to load it and try it out, but Zach and his mother forbade it. They did not want him shooting randomly in the dark.

The kids were sent to bed and the final presents from Santa Clause were brought out in each of the houses. Zach had brought a bolt of silk from Louisiana for Sarah and he snuck it under the tree while she was getting hidden gifts for the family.

They went to bed and he gave her a cameo brooch he found in the jewelry shop in Oakdale. She reciprocated with a new pipe with a silver 'Z' set in the bowl. One of the Fourth Rangers had carved it out of a piece of burl that had been brought in to the Commissary and William had saved for her. They thanked each other appropriately.

At the first crack of dawn, Zach was brought out of a sound sleep by the sound of a shot close by. He leapt out of bed and pulled his pants on. Grabbing the pistol from the drawer and the shotgun over the door he raced down the stairs shouting for Sarah to get her gun and go to the children.

He was met with a blast of icy air at the bottom of the stairs. The front door of the cabin was open. He made a hasty inspection of the ground floor, but found nothing. He sprinted for the door and raced outside and ducked behind the porch railing.

A figure was running for the house and he brought up the riot gun. Suddenly, he stood and shouted, "Don't shoot! It's William! Don't shoot!"

Doors in the other homes opened and Karl and Eduardo stepped out. They had dressed as hastily as Zach and stood with weapons in their hands staring at the excited figure running towards Zach, oblivious to his danger.

"I got him, dad. I got him," he shouted when he got near.

Zach hastily slipped into his boots and hurried down the steps. He ordered William into the house and rushed along his son's back trail. Karl jumped off the porch and told Eduardo to have Anne watch the rear of the house and ran after Zach.

Puffing with exertion in the cold air, the two men reached the haystack. On the ground was a good sized buck. During times of deep snow, Zach left the bars of the fence surrounding the hay stack down so the deer could find food when they would have trouble finding browse. He had never meant to entice the deer to be shot.

With a grim look on his face, he returned to the house and called William out. He pulled on his coat. When the boy came out of the house, he was carrying his new rifle. Zach took it from him. "Until I give you permission, you are not to touch this or any other weapon, understand?"

William nodded. He knew that he had broken the rules about shooting near the building and he had done so without adult supervision. He also knew that his father was as angry as he had ever seen him.

"Get the big butcher knife and come with me," Zach ordered. William ran to the kitchen and got the long knife from the drawer. He started to run back, but remembered in time and changed to a fast walk.

When he got back, they walked to the shed where Zach got the block and tackle used to string up animals when they were slaughtered. Sarah was on the porch with a worried look on her face. Karl, from across the yard, held up his hand to stop her from following the two.

Zach did not say a word. He indicated a hind leg of the carcass and grabbed the other. They dragged the deer to a wooden slaughter frame and Zach handed the tackle to his son. The

boy looked from his father to the hook at the top of the frame and tears trickled down his cheeks. He knew that he could never reach it.

“Stop crying,” ordered Zach. He picked up his son and held him until he had set the pulley. They positioned the deer under the frame and William clumsily set the tackle. He tried to pull the deer up, but Zach had to help him.

Unsmilingly, holding the boy, he indicated where the cut should be made to gut the animal. They worked on the task until the offal was out and the deer bled. As they were skinning the animal, Sarah came out and said that breakfast was ready.

Zach turned to her and said, “You and the kids eat and open your presents. William and I are going to be here a while.”

Sarah hesitated and went back to the house. When Zach and William came in an hour later, there was a fire in the barbecue pit and the deer was mounted on the spit and turning over the low fire. The pit was used for fair weather parties to roast a calf, sheep or whole pig.

Zach ignored his eldest son, except when he was opening presents. His other children were quiet, knowing that William was in trouble and worried about their father’s mood. Several times during the morning, Zach jerked his head towards the door and William left what he was doing and put more wood on the fire.

The last time, Zach followed him out and, when he came back; he sat him on the bench beside the door. “Well?” asked Zach.

“I’m not supposed to shoot near the houses.”

“Why?”

“Cause someone could get hurt.”

“And?”

“Don’t shoot without a adult with me.”

“And?”

William thought and went over the rules, but he couldn’t think of anything and began to cry. He was such a miserable figure that Zach nearly relented.

“And we let the deer feed on the hay because they are having a hard time and need the food. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it saves them from starving to death and being wasted. If we shoot them when they come to eat the hay, they won’t come. They will starve to death and be wasted.

“Now, do you understand?”

William nodded and said, “Yes, dad. I did three things wrong. Three strikes and you’re out.”

Zach was startled. He had never said anything like this unless they were playing baseball. He wanted to ask where he got that idea, but decided to wait for later. Zach rose and took the rifle from beside the door and handed it to William.

“I want you to clean it and remember today. You break any of those rules again and you will not be allowed to handle a gun for a year.”

William took the weapon and did as his father ordered. He swore that he would never break the rules again. There was never any question in his mind that his father always did what he said, except, of course, when he told William’s mom that he would never leave home and fight again.

When he returned to the family, Zach told them that William had broken some rules when he shot the deer turning on the spit, but that he had made an excellent shot that and they should all be proud of that.

William heard the praise and his mood lightened and he quickly and thoroughly cleaned his weapon. When Zach finished inspecting his job and ruffled his hair, everyone knew that William had been forgiven and the mood turned gay.

At dinner that afternoon, William got the first cut off the deer and Zach praised his, again, in front of the other families at the table.



## Chapter 18

### Old enemies, new friends?

*Winter 2049/2050*

*The winter was more severe than usual. Several times we heard wolves call, something we've never heard since Mitchell was re-founded. More Canadians are moving south and there have been reports of clashes with the Sioux and New Africans. They are still welcomed by the Mormons, if they are Mormon or will convert and the Columbians and Washingtonians. We have convinced the Sioux to let them pass through to Jefferson or the west coast, but there are still hotheads on both sides.*

*William has been a lot more conscientious after the incident on Christmas morning. I'm glad. I would hate to have taken the gun from him for a year, but I would have. Charlie got the .22 and is being very careful not to make the same mistake as William, though Charlie's gun is locked up when he and I are not out with it.*

*There have been few Muslims coming through. Word is that the more moderate of the three factions have come out on top. I hope that means that they will be better neighbors than the radicals and we can get along. What that will do regarding the war with the New Africans, I have no idea.*

*King Juan the First of Albuquerque is a better neighbor than Alfonso was. There is a brisk trade going on between the two settlements. There is even some trade going on with the Navajo, though our people are not allowed in their territory. Durango is making noise that it wants to form a government acceptable to the Confederation of States. They are calling themselves Colorado.*

*Not quite a Republic, but it IS a start*

*The Aztecs are telling our traders that they are getting pressure from the south. Not the Bolivians, but some group that has shoved them aside. The most I can make of it, it is a loose confederation of tribes out of Brazil, the Guianas and the Amazon. We don't know what is pushing them north, but they are migrating towards Azteca and have pushed the Bolivians back to the west coast of South America. Meanwhile, the Aztecs have revamped their military and are preparing to defend their southern border.*

*I am going to get a message sent to the Israelis and find out if this new group has a navy and if it's capable of amphibious landings. All we need is an invasion of Texas.*

A caravan of Mahdists arrived at the Mound early one morning at the tail end of winter. They were not refugees, but traders. Carl took Two Troop to see what they wanted and Four and Five Troops were activated for backup.

They were led by an Imam. There were fourteen wagons and a small guard of cavalry. Carl let them see the two tanks and led his troop to meet them.

The green turban and the peacock feather denoted a member of the Mahdist royal family and the troopers were prepared for a fight.

While Carl was making his cautious way from the Front Gate, the Mahdists were setting up an open-sided pavilion. They equipped it with carpets, tables and chairs. They were putting on the finishing touches when Carl rode up.

"Please, seat yourself, Mr. Smythe. I am Abdullah Cranston," the Imam said, waving to the chairs. "We would like to speak with you about trade."

Not to seem discourteous, Carl dismounted and signaled John Otis to join him. When they sat, servants offered them coffee and tea. John took a coffee, but Carl declined refreshments.

“Okay, you want to trade. It looks like you anticipated success,” Carl said, nodding towards the wagons.

“Well, we hoped that we could come to an agreement, of course, but we would move on to the Mormons or Sioux or the West Coast, if not.”

John sipped his coffee and found it thick and sweet. He indicated the peacock feather and observed, “Are you a prince of the house?”

Abdullah smiled and sat back in his chair. “No, the royal house has been replaced. After the Mahdi’s death, the remaining factions have come to a power-sharing agreement, you might say.”

Carl excused himself and returned to where Two Troop was waiting. He ordered William Massoglia to return to Mitchell with his squad and escort Mayor O’Grady and some of the Council to meet with the Muslims. He also told William to have the duty troop of rangers begin an immediate long range sweep to make sure that the trading expedition was not a distraction for an armed force.

He explained to Cranston when he returned to the tent, “I have no authority to deal with matters of trade, Imam Cranston. That is the purview of the Council and Mayor O’Grady. They might have to submit any agreements to the State Council in Gunnison, also.”

When the Imam nodded, Carl continued, “This power-sharing agreement you mentioned. Care to elaborate on it while we wait?”

“Ah. Yes. When the Mahdi died, he left two young sons. They were too young to rule and a regency was assumed by their uncle on their mother’s side. The mother being dead for several years. The regent, shall we say, was more interested in power than governance.

“Several Imams, of which I am humbly one, wanted to establish a Council of Imams to rule the state, doing away with the caliph.

“The military hovered in the background and waited. This made both the regent and the Imams very nervous, to say the least. The General was very unclear about what he and the army wanted.

“Rather than start a civil war and entice a military involvement, the Council met with the regent and General Hussein Johnson and we were able to work out a compromise. The General swore allegiance to the Caliph; the regent retained his post with much less power than he had hoped for and the Council of Imams formed an advisory council.

“General Jones suggested a parliament be elected to pass laws, subject to the Council’s approval that they were compatible with Shar’ia law.” finished the imam.

Carl shifted in his seat and asked, “So, are you still at war with the New Africans?”

“That struggle is in abeyance, for the time being,” he answered. “We are in negotiations with Mr. Turner and Mr. Potter regarding a cessation of hostilities and the establishment of mutually agreed upon borders.”

John sipped his coffee and asked, “And what about us? Are there still bad feelings?”

“We have never had bad feelings with Jefferson, young man,” smoothly answered the Imam. “We tried to rescue the townspeople that were spirited away, but left when we realized our mistake.”

Carl snorted, but did not point out that Jefferson had soundly defeated a Mahdist army that had attacked them. He thought that would not be politic.

Instead he queried, “What about the slaves who have been impressed into your army and their families?”

Abdullah smiled. “There are only believers in the Caliphate. All are willing worshipers of Allah.”

“And, we can test this?”

“But of course. Ask anyone in the camp.”

Carl snorted again. He knew and Abdullah knew that no one who was unhappy with the Caliphate would be allowed to travel to Jefferson.

At this point the Council and Gail O’Malley rode up in wagons and cars and on horses. Several of the council were still dressed in work clothes.

Carl hid a grin when he saw the imam’s mouth tighten when Gail was introduced as the mayor. The man seemed to give a mental shrug and shook her hand.

They got seated and Gail, in her best teacher manner, asked, “What can we do for you?”

“As I was telling Mr. Smythe, madam,” he began, “I am here to trade. My government would also like me to broach the subject of improved relations between our people.”

Gail held out her hand and said, “So, as a representative of your government, you have documents to show us.”

Abdullah cleared his throat and smiled. “I am an *unofficial* representative. Ladies and gentlemen, let me explain. My government is rather fragile. There are several factions which would like to see it fail. On the one hand, there are the Wahabists. They represent a radical branch of Islam. Though they are few in number, they contain several powerful members of the military. This wing of Islam takes a very strict view of Islam. It is this faction which would like to rearm and begin the Jihad anew.

“They are held in check for several reasons. The main one is that the Mahdi is dead and they have no single, strong leader. They are squabbling among themselves, to tell the truth.

Once one of them gains the upper hand, he will start to push for a radical interpretation of Shar'ia law. He will, in effect, become the new Mahdi, with all that entails.

“Another faction is looking for a new caliphate, whatever that means. In the short term, they are looking to build palaces, accumulate wealth, live in a Hollywood version of Sinbad the Sailor. These idiots do not realize that it will take a lot of slaves or serfs to create this kind of society. A few at the top will be wealthy and the rest will be subject to grinding poverty. The Wahabist faction will soon take power and we will have civil war and, eventually, a new Mahdi.”

The imam took a drink of water and tried to gauge his audience. “Now, you may think that a civil war would be a good thing and you could pick up the pieces. Yes, that is a thought, but if the Wahabists win and come out of the struggle strong, then you will have a new Mahdi with a trained and veteran army and a new Jihad will begin.”

Jonas Ward held up his hand. “Okay, we don’t want a new Mahdi. What do you have to offer?”

“Ah. What we have to offer is peace. The people are tired of war. Between you and the Fundamentalists and the New Africans, we have lost a generation of our young men.”

“Hold it,” interrupted Carl. “What you have lost is a generation of slave soldiers. We know how your army is recruited. Some of them helped start Jefferson and are still members of our troops. So, don’t go on about how you have suffered. Please.”

“You may not believe it, but many of our own sons have fallen, also. And not all of the recruits to our army came unwillingly. You may not like Islam, but it has offered much to many.” The imam took a deep breath, trying to remain calm.

“My government offers a middle road. We want peace and trade and stability. We want the past to remain in the past.

“With peace, respect from our neighbors and an improvement in the standard of living, we can show the people that this middle road is best for all. The Wahabists will have no one to recruit if the people are content.

”The reason I am here unofficially is that my government wants something concrete to tell the people before we make any official move. The hold we have on the reins of power is fragile and any setback could result in the military taking a hand.”

The council looked at each other and many nodded at the wisdom of this.

“So you want peace. Peace is good,” said Jonas. “We have things to trade. However, you must understand our mistrust. You have attacked us. You have worked with the reavers to enslave our people. You have supported the reavers in their conquest of the Fundamentalists lands. How are we to know that this is not a ruse?”

The imam threw up his arms in frustration. He rose and paced the room. “I understand what you are saying. What can we do to prove that we have changed?”

Before anyone had a chance to speak, Gail stood and said, “Mr. Cranston, that is a question which will take some thought. You want to trade? Fine. Set up your goods here. We will spread the word that you want to trade.

“However, we will have a troop in the vicinity to assure that things go smoothly on both sides.” She looked around and the majority of the Council was nodding agreement.

“Two conditions. One, anyone held against their will in your camp will be freed immediately. Two, you will turn over to us anyone that are recognized as criminals. That is to

say, anyone accused of murder or kidnapping. They will be tried under our laws and suffer our punishments, if they are found guilty.”

When the man started to protest, Gail held up her hand. “Do not insult our intelligence by protesting. You know what I am talking about. There are many here who have escaped from the Caliphate. Many lost family or friends when they were taken from their homes. Sisters, mothers, wives were raped and taken as concubines. Our people will be understandably upset if they see the perpetrators of these crimes walking around.”

Abdullah inclined his head in agreement. “You may interview any of the members of the caravan. If any wish to remain with you, they will be free to do so.”

“Good,” Gail said, picking up her notebook and tucking it under her arm. “We will meet again at the end of the week and give you our decision.”

Carl stayed behind as the Council returned to Mitchell. “Abdullah, I will give you the benefit of the doubt. I will bring several of the men from my troop and we will interview your people. I imagine, though, that you were ready for this and screened them pretty well.

“Several rules. You are not allowed to enter Mitchell. You and your caravan are under our laws and subject to our justice. We are a little nervous, so you will be restricted to your camp after sunset. Anyone wandering around will be dealt with. Any questions?”

“Mr. Smythe, I completely understand your wariness. And, yes, I screened my people very carefully. They are all loyal Muslims.”

Carl and a couple of troopers wandered the camp stopping to speak with some of the men, but no one expressed any interest in deserting the caravan or expressed unhappiness with their lot. He returned to the Barracks and received Ed Tingle’s report that there was no sign of any other Mahdists in the vicinity.



He sent Ed and his rangers out to keep an eye on the caravan, promising to relieve him after dark. He ordered a call up of the rangers on call and sat back in his chair uneasy, but confident that he had done everything in his power to keep a lid on the situation.

Trading had started out slowly, but picked up as the week progressed. The caravan supplied scavenged products such as cloth, liquor and luxury items. They took wood products, wool cloth, honey and cheese in trade.

The week ended and the imam and the Council met again at the Mahdist camp. Gail stated that the Council was willing to continue trading with the Muslims. "However, we have certain conditions," she continued. "Family members of our citizens will be allowed to emigrate. Any disputes would be subject to the laws of Jefferson. We will allow passage through our territory, but will not guarantee the safety of the caravans.

"As to any other agreements, you will have to meet with the government of Jefferson."

"So we have an agreement in principle? I can return to New Mecca and tell them that we have made progress?" asked Abdullah.

"You may tell them that you have a trading agreement with the town of Mitchell and that an official delegation will be welcomed to speak with the State of Jefferson. We have spoken with the governor and the State Council has agreed to talks."

"Where would these talks take place, may I ask?"

"They can take place here or at some other site. In the past, we have met on neutral ground. Where do you suggest?" asked Gail.

"Neutral ground is acceptable. There was a town we passed on our way here called Ogallala, in Nebraska. Would that do?"

Carl brought a map and pointed out the location to the Council. While the refreshments were replenished, he sorted through several other maps and nodded to Gail, signifying that he felt that he could protect the site.

Gail nodded and told the imam that she would pass this on to the State Council. “Who would you suggest attend this conference?” she asked.

Confused about the question, Abdullah answered cautiously, “Whoever you would assign is acceptable to us. We will send several ministers who have authority to speak for the government. However, any agreement would have to be ratified by both parties.”

“What I meant was, should we include any other parties? There are the old Fundamentalists from Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas and the Sioux. They have a stake in this if for nothing else than transit rights across their territory.”

“Ah, yes. You are quite right. Would you be so kind as to inform and invite them?” replied Imam Cranston.

“Yes, we will. Shall we say the meeting will be held in three weeks? And let us limit participants to four members from all parties? And no more than a hundred troopers from New Mecca and thirty-five each from all others?”

The terms were finalized and the caravan departed. Carl had a troop of rangers shadow them across the Nebraska border. He was still uneasy about the sudden turn around in the Mahdist attitude, but there was nothing he could put his finger on.

## Chapter 19

### The Conference

*Spring 2050*

*I am not happy about this at all. It is probably my prejudice, but I don't trust the Mahdists. Sarah says people change, but I think their religion is too ingrained in their nature to see a change. I don't mind helping the Muslim refugees get to Florida. There they are out of the way and it splits the Muslims. I do feel guilty about the problem we are visiting on our children. They are the ones who will have to deal with the situation in their time.*

*Oh, well, we will play our part and we need fresh blood for the herds. I would like to pick up some more milk cows and some Herefords or Brahma or Angus to 'beef' up the beef herds. If we can pick up some wild horses with good lines that would be a bonus.*

Messages were sent to Raphael, Ralph Meeker and the Sioux. They all sent replies that they would attend the conference. Willy Potter and Jordan Frey were selected as the representatives from Jefferson. Ed Black was to provide Nineteen Troop from Gunnison and Twenty-four Troop from Rio Grande as the official escort. Carl was sending Ihro Masamoto and the Second Rangers and Paul Diggs and the Fourth Rangers a week early to scout the meeting site.

Zach and Leo led One and Four Troops and the Training Troop, augmented with five senior men from Twenty-eight troop as trainers. Ostensibly, they were on a cattle drive around Julesburg, on the Platte. They would form an available reserve if the Mahdists tried anything. And, as Zach put it, "I am looking for new breeding stock, anyway."

The players were set when the dawn of the meeting arrived. The rangers had reported that the site was clear. The town had been burned and the meeting took place in North Park,

north of the city. The Mahdists set up camp on the east side of the stream and the other found spots on the west side. Both sides felt it would be wiser to keep a barrier between their forces.

Willy Potter said to Imam Cranston, “You provided our governments with an agenda. Why don’t you lead off.”

The Imam bowed and answered, “I would like to start with a prayer to Allah, the just and merciful.” He intoned a short prayer for the success of the meeting that was ecumenical enough not to anger the non-Muslims at the table. He then sat and picked up the agenda.

“The first item is to declare peace between our peoples. We suggest that there be no more cross border raids. No more kidnapping of the citizens of our nations. All of the other points hinge upon this. If we cannot have peace, there will be no trade, passage, delegations. So, let us decide on peace.”

Homer Jackman from Arkansas spoke, “I agree. Peace is a good state. For me, howsomeever, I have a di-rect question. Where are these here borders?”

The rest of the delegates nodded at the question.

The imam signaled to an aide who brought over a large map and spread it on the table. It had thin, black tape marking boundaries on a National Geographic topographical map. Each delegate immediately focused on his area of the map.

Jordan Frey let out a loud laugh.of derision. “If I’m reading this right, the Caliphate extends from Rolla, North Dakota up here near the Canadian border, down through Aberdeen, South Dakota to North Platte, Nebraska, along I-80 to Kearny, south to Wichita, Kansas, south east to Nashville and directly east to the Atlantic?”

The imam spread his hands. “That territory is uninhabited, for the most part, in the west. The outlaw bands have taken Missouri and we will take it upon ourselves to eliminate them. We have given much thought to the boundaries and we feel that they have been drawn fairly.

“As you can see, the Sioux have western Dakotas and Nebraska and the Southern Plains, except for the enclave the Kansans claim. The southern part of Missouri is unclaimed by us.”

Everyone began talking at once until Willy hit the table with the palm of his hand several times. “All right, let’s settle down, now. This is just a preliminary look at things. Let’s just talk one at a time. Since we started at the top, why don’t we yield the floor to Two Wolves first?”

Two Wolves looked at the map as if it was a puzzle. He began to pull up the existing tape, but Abdullah stopped him and offered a roll of red. The Sioux smiled his thanks and tore off a length. He started at the Iowa border and ended his line at Kansas City. He took another piece and ran it east and north to Lake Erie and north to Lake Huron. “The plains are Sioux,” he said.

Willy nodded to Raphael. “Why don’t you go next, Raph?”

Raphael took the tape proffered by Two Wolves and dropped a line south along the Missouri. “That should be enough for Kansas. Missouri and the land east have remnants of our people and when we get rid of the reavers, they can set themselves up. Don’t you agree, Homer?”

Jackman spat into a jar and nodded. “No need of me playing with that tape. You boys just keep your turbans north of that there red line and we won’t have no problem. We will scotch our own skunks when the time comes. We did in Loo-si-anna and we can do it in Mizoo.”

Carl, standing behind his delegation as an observer, thought, “This is too easy. Abdullah has only made token protests over the boundaries.”

The morning session ended at noon and the delegates returned to their camp. Carl expressed his concern to Willy and Jordan.

“We noticed,” said Jordan. “They put up a fight, but ended up taking our boundaries in the end.”

Willy lit a thin cigar. “Well, we’ll find out what they really want in the end, I suppose,” he said.

“We’ll see how he hops when we bring our logs to the fire and heat that ol’ griddle up,” said Homer, spitting a stream of tobacco juice at an innocent beetle. “Could be they want to get us in a comfortable mood before they spring the ax on the chicken.”

“I’ll pretend to know what that means,” Jordan snorted. “Let us have lunch, shall we?”

The afternoon session began with the topic of trade. Adbullah proposed the free movement of trade caravans throughout the states involved. Carl had warned about this. There was no way, he told the delegations, that these caravans could be tracked. An enemy could infiltrate a lot of troops into an area under cover of several caravans entering from different areas.

Raphael’s counterproposal suggested a site on the western border of Iowa for a permanent camp. He suggested Lake Manawa State Park, just south of Council Bluffs. Carl didn’t like Abdullah’s satisfied smile as the imam agreed to the proposal. He did ask that caravans to the west coast be allowed and Jordan suggested that a limited number of routes would be allowed and the number of licensed traders remain small.

They dickered over the number of traders and the routes. When they had finished hammering out an agreement on trade and passage, it was dinnertime and the session broke up.

The next morning, they took up the question of missionaries. “Our Koran commands us to spread the true faith,” Abdullah said. “We ask only that our missionaries be allowed to travel freely and spread the word of Muhammed, blessed be his name.”

Homer Jackman grinned and nodded his approval. “That suits me just fine. We gonna allow them mosques and such, too?”

“Well, converts would need a place of worship,” said Abdullah, obviously surprised at the Arkansawyer’s enthusiastic agreement.

“Good, then I’ll tell the preachers they can start heading for the Caliphate and teaching the bible and setting up churches. There are still churches still standing, aren’t there? With bells in ‘em?” Homer asked innocently.

Abdullah and his delegation shifted uncomfortably. “Of course, we would welcome your preachers, but the political situation would make it dangerous for them. There are still many Wahabists or, as they refer to themselves, Muwahiddun. My government could not guarantee your safety.”

“And yet, brother,” said Homer, taking a fresh bite out of his plug, “you want us to let your preachers in?”

“Your governments are strong and in control of your peoples. Our missionaries, we feel, would be safe. When our government stabilizes, then we would welcome you.”

Homer turned to Willy Potter and asked, “Didn’t Jefferson get into a shoving match about this very same thing with the Mormons? How did you boys make the cow happy on that one?”

Willy grinned. “We felt that only a reciprocal agreement would be fair.”

Jackman turned to Abdullah and scratched his head. “Them big syllable words are hard to get a my simple mind around, but I think he said if you want to trade mules, both sides better have one to do the tradin’ with.”

Jordan chuckled and addressed Abdullah and his fellow delegates. “What he means is that we will both hold off on sending missionaries until we both feel it is safe.”

The Mahdists argued for more than an hour on this topic, but their counterparts would not budge and they were forced to agree to table the question until another time.

After an early lunch, they discussed the exchange of ambassadors. Both sides were lukewarm to the idea. Having to set up a diplomatic corps, embassies and security was looked on as an unnecessary expense. Both sides knew that counter intelligence would have to be put in place and spies and all that entailed. They agreed that any diplomatic meetings could be held on the Aztec model. Meetings would be set up as necessary.

The last item on the Mahdist agenda was simply labeled ‘Compensation’. The imam looked at his fellow delegates and began, “Certain members of the government insisted that this item be addressed. We feel we are owed compensation from you for the losses, both men and material we suffered at your hands.”

Raphael exploded from his chair. “What do you mean ‘suffered at our hands’?” he demanded. He shook off Willy’s hand when potter tried to ease him back into his seat.

Abdullah licked his lips. “Simply that the aide given to the New Africans and the Fundamentalists cost the Army of Allah hundreds of men and many supplies.”

Homer slowly drew his Arkansas Toothpick and began flipping it in the air and catching the hilt or point. His eyes had a dangerous glitter and the guards behind the Mahdist delegation began to shift nervously and their hands moved towards their weapons.



Carl, seeing that a bloodbath was imminent, stepped forward and put a hand on Raphael's shoulder and forced him into his seat. He frowned at Homer and shook his head. The man from Arkansas raised his eyebrows, but put the knife away. When the tension had lessened, Carl stepped back.

Willy leaned forward, elbows on the table and his chin on his folded hands. "Mr. Cranston, what ever we have done was done while a hostile state still existed between us. We considered the New Africans as allies and acted accordingly. You have no right to ask for or expectations to receive any compensation. As a matter of fact, we have as much of or more of a claim to compensation, with you aid to the reavers.

"Now," he said, sitting back. "Since you have come to the end of your agenda, we have an item or two ourselves.

"First, you and your government will immediately halt all aid to our enemies. This includes the reavers and any group that attacks us, either domestically or externally. Any leaders of those parties who seek asylum in the Caliphate will be turned over to us for judgment. We make the same promise to you and will inform our allies of that.

"Second, you have slaves that are to be returned. They will be given a wagon or packhorse and a mount, along with supplies and a working firearm and ammunition. They will be escorted to Lake Manawa and turned over to our representatives at the end of next month. This, sir, is not negotiable."

Abdullah's mouth was compressed into a straight line and his jaw clenched while Willy was speaking. Slowly, he relaxed enough to speak. "On the first point, we agree. From this point forward, you will turn our enemies over to us and we will turn your enemies over to you."

“On the other point, we do not agree. What you call slaves, we call soldiers in the Army of Allah. They were conscripted to defend their homeland against the infidels,” another of the Mahdists inserted. He had a long black beard and fierce eyes.

“Let’s cut the crap,” said Homer. “The reavers been sellin’ young’uns to you for years. We know that, ‘cause they took kids from Arkansas when they were still organized and strong enough to raid. You got yourselves a bunch of our people and I’m wanting them back.”

Two Wolves nodded. “Some of our young men were kidnapped by slave rings and sold to your patrols. My friend Matt Busby broke up one such ring just a few months ago.”

Jordan Frey interjected, “When you attacked us several years ago, most of your force was made up of young men from the Chicago area you captured in the fighting there. We freed them and they went on to form New Africa. Some of the founders of Mitchell were freed from forced servitude. We want those boys.

“Also, girls were taken and enslaved. We want them also.”

As tempers began to flare, Abdullah raised his hand and asked for a recess until the morning to discuss these demands with his delegation. Willy looked around at his side of the table and agreed after seeing that the delegates nodded in agreement.

Back at their own camp, Carl poured a cup of coffee and made himself comfortable in a camp chair. He wished Zach was around. He sipped from his cup and asked Jordan, “Do you really think they will send back those boys and girls?”

“Well, Carl, that depends on what they want.”

“How do you mean?”

“There is an undercurrent here. I have felt it in the courtroom many times. These guys have a plan and, so far, they have been dropping red herrings. There is something they want and I am certain that they will give us a lot of concessions to get it.”

Homer blew his nose on an old bandana. “Got any ideas? If so, then put a rope on them and trot them out so we can see how they move.”

“Wait a minute, Homer,” said Carl. “You can’t be the rube you pretend to be.”

Raphael laughed. “Homer here has a doctorate in English Literature and another in Modern Prose. He speaks six languages and won’t join MENSA because he thinks they are slow.”

Homer had a dolorous look on his face as he explained, “I’m just a simple country boy cursed with a brain. My pappy forced me to go to school, draggin’ me away from the log cabin I grew up in.”

Raphael snorted. “He has always been the biggest liar in the county. His father owned three mills and several thousand acres of timber. He wasn’t born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but with a golden shovel. Daddy gave away more money in a year to charity than the county’s yearly budget. And it was a rich county, too.

“Don’t let old Homer fool you, he puts on the country bumpkin air, but is one of the smartest and well educated men around.”

Jackman leaned back in his chair with a look of disdain on his face and said, “If you all are just goin’ to insult me, I’m a-gonna just sit here in silence.”

“All right,” said Jordan after the laughter died down. “Let us get down to cases. From what I see, there isn’t much they can want to the west. We aren’t give them free rein for trade or missionaries or travel.

“They must know that they face us all, if they attack one of us.”

“The only thing I can think of is they have bigger fish to fry somewhere else and they need us quiet. Either they are going after the North Africans in a big way or they are looking to the east.”

“Why do they need us quiet?” asked Carl. They must know that we won’t attack them unless they attack us. And what good is a treaty anyway? If we want to break it, we will.”

Willy stared at the sky, smoking thoughtfully. “How many Muslims have we let through to Florida?” he asked.

“Oh, three or four hundred in the past year. Maybe more,” answered Carl.

“I wonder how many are there, now,” Potter mused.

“What are you getting at?” asked Carl.

“We don’t know what is east of Louisiana, western Tennessee, Kentucky or Ohio. We just gave them free access to the east coast. The Muslims in Florida could have spread out into Georgia, even South Carolina. What if they were not just peaceful farmers, but an advance force designed to start a second front of, what, conversions.

“It makes a weird kind of sense. If the survivors on the east coast remain in scattered farms or communities, the Muslim methods of conversion would work. Go in and kill anyone who resists or could form a resistance. Form troops and keep doing it.”

“Why go through this elaborate scheme?” asked Homer.

Willy was getting excited. He asked Carl to get a map that included the eastern half of the country. He gnawed on a thumbnail until Carl returned. They spread the map and Willy jabbed a finger at various locations as he spoke.

“The Muslims controll Iowa and parts of northern Missouri. The reavers took over the rest of Missouri, northeastern Arkansas. The Louisiana reavers controlled most of that state, clearing out great swaths of country. Except for parts of Mississippi that put a wall of Mahdists or reavers between us and the east coast.”

“Yeah, and?” asked Homer.

“And, we have helped several hundred Mahdists move to Florida to set up camp. Look, let’s say they didn’t spread out to the north into Georgia and South Carolina, but west to the Florida panhandle and then north towards the Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas border where they join the reavers.”

Jordan let out a whistle. “My God, they have the rest of the country to themselves. They could be rebuilding the Caliphate. They may be assembling a huge army.”

“Right. Look what we have given them. Effectively, their border is Kansas City. There’s very little between that dead zone and the St. Louis dead zone. The reavers cleared out Missouri and parts of eastern Arkansas.”

“Yeah, we have had people coming into Fort Smith for a couple of years from the east,” said Homer.

“So, eastern Arkansas and western Mississippi, I’ll bet are pretty empty.” Willy continued. “The Louisiana reavers have kept the Texans at bay. Now, I don’t thing the Louisiana reavers and the Mahdists were working together, but they used them as a block to the Texans.”

“The most fortunate occurrence was the Israelis move to Cuba. That left Florida open. Hell, I’m even wondering if the Muslims even landed in Florida. If they landed in Mobile, Alabama, they could be up near Tupelo, Mississippi or Memphis, Tennessee.”

“And that puts them behind the reavers in Missouri and on a route north,” finished Carl.

“But why this move to make peace?”

“The reavers. We eliminated the Louisiana reavers, completely. The Missouri reavers have fallen apart. The Texans are starting to help the survivors from Louisiana to rebuild and Raphael’s and Homer’s people will start moving into Missouri. If the Muslims from the south don’t close the gap, refugees will probably get out to the west and their plan will be revealed.

“With that kind of move, we would be forced to try and stop them. Either we attack the Caliphate directly or we sent troops into the south and break up whatever organization they have build there. Remember, they have been bloodied more than once by us.”

Raphael brought them all down to reality with his next observation. “Let’s calm down here. We don’t even know if that is what is happening. We may be jumping at boogey men. It is possible that this is all what they say, a moderate group of Muslims are trying to build peaceful relations with their neighbors.”

“I ain’t seen no flying pigs,” Homer muttered.

“I agree with Raphael. Speculation is not proof,” said Jordan. “I suggest we continue these talks with the Mahdists. Whatever treaty we agree on would have to be ratified by the the Sioux, Jeffersons, Kansans and the Arkansawyers. That will take several months, at least.

“In the meantime, we send an expedition to the east. Carl, can we send the rangers you have in the hills? Unfortunately, you can’t be the one to lead them, you have made yourself conspicuous here. The Mahdists may suspect something if you suddenly disappear.”

“I believe Willy’s theory, myself. I think we can send Ihiro and Paul. As you may know, Leo and Zach are at Julesburg.” He smiled and added, “Zach won’t even have to pretend he isn’t going, since Sarah isn’t around.” The rest laughed.

“Let me get in touch with the Rangers. I can explain the situation and our suspicions to them and they can ride for Julesburg, get Zach and Leo and head east. I’ll give them a time frame of three months to get what information they can.

“Jordan, can we hold up the treaty until then?”

“I’m a lawyer, Carl, I can hold it up forever and make it look I’m doing them a favor.”

Carl took his rifle and half-dozen troopers and rode out of camp. He let it be known that he was going hunting for fresh meat.

In a copse of trees six miles from Omaha, they found Second Rangers in camp. Carl took Ihiro and Todd Spires aside and explained the situation to them. He ordered them to find Fourth Rangers and find the roundup. Once they had informed Leo and Zach, the two ranger troops were to scout to the east and report back to Gunnison by the end of May.

Within minutes after the briefing, the Rangers had cleaned up the camp and were moving southwest. Carl and his party shot a couple of cows and an antelope on the way back. They loaded the best cuts of meat on the packhorses and dropped off a share of the meat to the Muslims.

By the end of the conference, the Mahdists had given into every demand, though it had taken an additional two days to do so. The document was drawn up and both parties agreed to meet in three months at the same place.

## Chapter 20

### Scout East

*Spring 2050*

*There is a lot of hope that the problems with the Mahdists might be over. If it is true about the suppression of the radicals, then the only problem would be the Aztecs and the remnants of the reavers. And the reavers, without the support of the Mahdists, would be pretty isolated. However, the past has given us no reason to trust the Mahdists. I suspect that this whole thing is an effort to end our help to NA, so they can be put in the same position as the reavers; isolated and with no support.*

*Whatever the reason, we do need to collect a herd. The long winter cut into our herds. Palo Duro reported about half of their cattle died in the blizzards. I'm looking for some Herefords or Angus to build the meat stock and some Jerseys or Guernseys for the dairy herd. Speaking of the dairy herd and milk, Doc says that the number of babies is growing in leaps and bounds. We had over two hundred and twenty-five births last year and he says we will have almost a hundred more this year. I guess the run on baby clothes and bottles won't slow down any.*

*Whatever the need, I am glad that Sarah didn't mind my going on this little expedition. Like she said, it isn't likely we will be needed and we do need to gather cattle. We did find a couple of families and introduced them to Jefferson, but they seemed pretty independent, so I don't think they will come in, just yet.*

*Now that the reavers in Louisiana are gone and the Texans are helping the survivors get organized, the only trouble is going to be from the Missouri reavers and they have broken up into small gangs that won't be a threat to any communities, but the small villages and farms will*



*have to be pretty vigilant. Raphael and Ralph are sending rangers in to track them down and strong patrols to take care of those that are found. Raphael says that some Kansans are heading back to Missouri to reclaim the land from the carnage the reavers left.*

*I was talking to Leo the other night on the trail and, by my calculations; we have organized a confederacy the size of a third of the old United States. If we keep moving east, we should have explored the rest of the country in the next couple of years. The only non-U.S. groups are the Mormons, the Aztecs, the Sioux and the Mahdists. This includes the ones in Iowa and Florida, and there aren't many in Florida.*

*It may not happen in my lifetime, but this country could get back together in my kids lifetime or their kids. Of course, whatever is moving south of the Aztecs or some other group outside of the country, like Europe, Asia or Africa, could throw those ideas into a cocked hat.*

*We have picked up five hundred head or so. There are thirty to forty beef cattle that I want to try and breed out and two dozen that look to be from milk herds that scattered. Ed hasn't found any diseases that are a big problem. And with the equipment that we had to pack, he had better find anything more serious than a chipped tooth. He has one wagon he calls his traveling lab.*

*I'm going to have a couple of the boys ride towards Ogallala in a couple of days, if we don't hear from Carl. We have about cleaned out the breaks along the river and we need to head back with what we have or change our gather point to fresh grounds.*

They set up camp along the river where a stream of fresh water joined the Platte. The troopers broke up into three teams; one to guard the camp and ride herd on the gathered cattle, another to patrol a wide perimeter and the third to search the river bottom and breaks for wild

cattle. They started by combing the river and stream bottoms. The cattle here were wilder than their cousins at the original roundup point to the west.

The wind blew constantly and dust and sand got into everything. Tempers were frayed and Zach, Leo and the troop leaders had to keep watch for potential problems among the troopers. Leo ordered that practical jokes were off limits and, after a few latrine and KP extra duty, the jokers were quiet.

The leaders of the expedition decided that every fourth day was light duty. One troop was assigned to patrol, guard the cattle and take care of camp duties. The others had a day off. The training troop spent half-day training sessions under Leo or Jason Costler.

There were a few summer storms that threatened to spook the cattle into a stampede, but the troopers were able to keep the herd circling when they got restless.

By the second week, they had over five hundred cattle and there were few animals left. To keep the troops busy, Zach had them cull the herd and begin drying the meat in the solar dryers they brought along.

Leo suggested that he and Jason take the training troop on a wide circle towards Ogallala to see if they could contact the rangers or the delegation returning. Zach cautioned them not to get too close to the meeting. They didn't want to start an 'international incident' just because they were impatient. Leo grinned and asked, "Would I do anything dangerous?"

They left the next morning. Zach kept the rest of the troopers in and around camp, cleaning weapons, drying meat and riding guard duty. That evening, the Training Troop returned with the Rangers and Ihiri, Paul, Ed and Todd informed Zach and Leo about the new mission.

Leo and Zach looked at each other. They knew that they would never convince their wives that this was not planned. Leo ordered One, Four and the Training Troop to be prepared to move out by noon the next day. He put Jason Costler in command and ordered them to move slowly west.

When they left, the ranger leaders and Zach and Leo sat down to sort out their route. They spread maps and huddled around. Ihiri suggested that they cut south on US385 to I-70, head east to US24 to US83 to Selden. There they could re-supply and pick up a couple of Raphael's men who know the area east of Missouri. After that, they would head southeast for Wichita and Springfield. There, they would cut east for New Madrid on the Mississippi. They would follow that south until they found Mahdists or the gulf. Todd suggested that they head for Florida and find out where the Mahdists had their settlements.

"Good idea, Todd," complemented Leo, "but that would take a few more weeks than we have. It is important to find out where they are settled, but we have to get back to report, or at least, within radio range. I wish the interference would fade more and we could bounce signals off the satellites.

"Anyway, Todd, I would suggest that your troop heads for Florida and the rest of us will cut up I-59 to I-20 to I-65 and follow I-65 to Nashville. From there we go to Paducah; east across Missouri and we wait for Todd at Fort Smith, Arkansas. We should be able to relay a message through Selden to Mitchell or Gunnison.

"Meanwhile, Todd, you come back through Birmingham to US78 to Memphis. Cut across I-40, past Little Rock to Fort Smith."

Paul Diggs looked at the penciled routes. “If we haven’t found any Mahdists off the reservation, then we probably won’t. Between us we will have covered a good portion of the ground the Mahdists are looking at, if Willy’s suspicions are right.”

“So, all we have to do is search for any sign of Mahdists east of Missouri. Avoid being seen by them, avoid getting killed by reavers and get back,” said Zach sarcastically.

Ihiro grinned and nodded, “That’s about the size of it, Zach. But that can’t be too hard for the leader of the Exodus.”

Zach threw a map at him, which he ducked laughing.

The trip to Selden went quickly. There they found that a messenger had arrived from Raphael. The Kansans were to provide guides for the area east of Missouri. They re-supplied and rested as the guides were recruited.

Leo selected five of the volunteers, based on woods craft and knowledge of states through which they would pass. Dave Whittle was a tall, silent man from Alabama. He had spent three months hiding and traveling to Missouri. There he had been chased east to Kansas by the reavers.

Paul Newton was a short, skinny man with enormous moustaches. He always had a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face. He weighed one hundred and thirty pound soaking wet. He had been a jockey as a boy and knew the Kentucky bluegrass region well.

Corey Tapwood was fifteen years old and had been orphaned by the plague that swept the southeast. At thirteen, he had buried his family and left his home near Rome, Georgia and drifted around the country until he had ended up in Kansas.

Mason Montgomery had lived in Tennessee most of his life. He was somewhere between thirty and sixty. His thick, black hair and clear amber eyes pointed to the younger age, but his face was lined enough to suggest the latter. He chewed tobacco and rarely spoke.

The final member of the team of guides was Horace Jones. He had been swept up in the reavers' wars. He was recruited by a band under Skull when he and several travelers had arrived in Missouri from Mississippi. The others had been killed in various battles of the Reaver Wars. Horace had managed to play dead after one encounter and escape west to Kansas. He had arrived at the settlement of Emporia more dead than alive. His left hand was infected from a wound suffered in the battle and the doctor had to amputate. He always carried three pistols and a sawed off shotgun.

Milo Smith and his troop were to provide an escort to Springfield, Missouri. From that point the rangers would continue on in the company of the five scouts. The ranger troops took turns providing a screen for the riders. Those on duty left their mounts with the main body and stayed several miles ahead on their route of travel.

Tim Chin ran up when they were a day out of Springfield. He told them that a small party of reavers was on the road ahead of them. "The rest of the rangers are screening them. There are only a dozen, we could ambush them and wipe them out, but Paul thought that would alert the rest of the band, if there is one, to the fact we are in the area."

Leo called a meeting of the leaders and they decided that they would hide in a stand of timber on a hill overlooking the road. As much as they would have liked to eliminate reavers, they didn't know if there were any more of them around.

The horses were held on the far side of the hill and the rest of the men lined the hill. The first man to come into view was the point. He searched the surrounding woods as he passed. A

few minutes later, the head of a small column appeared. The leader was hooded and wore a straw cowboy hat with a black feather in the silver studded band.

Milo reached for the Zach's binoculars and stared at the masked man. He gave a low whistle, which rose to the cry of a crow. The leader of the column raised his hand and halted the column. He took off his hat and waved it over his head and called, "Milo, that is the worst call I have ever heard. Only you could butcher it so badly. Where are you?"

Milo stood and began to work his way down the hill. Leo and Zach signaled the rest of the party to remain where they were, hidden in the trees. Smith walked up and shook the masked man's hand. They spoke for a few minutes and Milo turned and signaled those on the hill to come down.

Zach and Leo exchanged glances and Leo shrugged and said, "We might as well."

The troopers moved down the hill in a skirmish line and the masked rider had to turn and calm his nervous men. When they reached the road, Milo introduced them to the masked rider, "This is Gabriel. He is one of the Angels."

They shook hands; Zach noticing that he wore a glove and the little and ring finger were empty. Gabriel suggested that they camp at a small clearing they had passed and talk. As they agreed, the point for the column came walking down the road with Horace behind him, prodding him with his shotgun.

"I didn't think we should forget about our friend, here," he said, turning the man over to Milo.

They followed Gabriel's column to the small picnic area. One of the tables was sturdy enough to use and Gabriel, Milo, Leo and Zach sat while the troopers on both sides set up camp.

"It's good to see you, Milo. I heard you were in Kansas."

“Still am. I lead a troop for Raphael out of Selden. We are escorting some people to Springfield.

“Hell, man, we thought you were dead. Even Raphael. The survivors of the explosion said you were one of the Archangels at the podium that day.”

Gabriel touched the right side of his mask. “I was. The first explosion blew me behind the high altar. The second explosion started the fire. Some accelerant, I suppose. I was unconscious, but two of my men pulled me out of the building. I woke up a couple of days later in a cave.” He held up his right hand. “I was burned pretty badly. I lost part of my right hand and the right side of my face. That is why I wear this mask. Otherwise, I frighten the children.” The last was said with a sad note.

“What about the rest, did any of the other Archangels survive?” asked Milo.

Gabriel sighed. “Michael was standing in front of the first explosion. Seriel and Jophiel are dead. We met up with some of their men after the fighting in New Jerusalem. We heard that Chemuel was executed by General March for not joining him. There were rumors that Jegudiel was killed near St. Louis, but that’s only rumor.

“I haven’t heard what happened to the other nine.”

Leo leaned over to Zach and whispered. From my reading, there are only seven or eight archangels, counting the book of Enoch.”

Gabriel heard the comment and said, “When Parson Simmons started building the Army of God, he wanted to use the name of the archangels for the commanders. As the army grew, we used up the first eight and went to the other Abrahamic religions, including Islam, to get the rest of the names. In all there were fifteen of us. I imagine that, at least, a few of the names were referring to the same being, but Simmons would not be swayed.

“We were zealots, you understand. He could have called us the colors of the rainbow and we would have been happy. All we wanted to do in those days was set up a Christian Kingdom on Earth. General March put an end to that.”

Milo accepted a cup of coffee and asked, “What have you been doing since? We took you for a band of reavers.”

Gabriel made an amused noise in his throat. “I am a reaver,” he answered. “At least, I am commanding these men for one of the reavers.”

Leo’s hand dropped to his lap, just inches from his gun or knife. Zach sat back, holding his cup of hot coffee in his left hand, ready to throw it at the man across the table. He figured he could drop off the bench and draw his gun, maybe getting a few of them before his went down. Milo looked confused.

Gabriel held up both his hands. “Don’t worry. It is not what you think. Let me explain how it really is.

“John Benson was a minor player in March’s band. He was given the area from Rescue to Purdy to Crane to Battlefield to Miller. He was not like the other scum that followed March. He was a corporal or sergeant in the old army. Like a lot of others, when things fell apart, he and some of his fellow soldiers joined together for survival.

“They scavenged and fought other scavengers and reavers. It went from taking things from abandoned property to trading things to the final stage of taking from the weak and defenseless. The only difference with Benson was that he didn’t allow rape or abuse. Before I joined him, I saw him hang one of his men found raping a girl.

“Oh, the men could take any women who wanted to go with them. A lot did, to get a bite to eat and protection. They led this existence until they met March. He had set himself up in



New Jerusalem, by then. Benson had thirty or forty in his band, a fairly good sized one. With the women and children he had collected, there was almost a village following him.

”At any rate, he joined March and was given his territory. The only requirement was that supplies and young men were to be sent to the capitol or wherever March was. These payments were to be delivered on the first of every quarter. John Benson sent the supplies, all right, but he refused to send the young men. He found out that March was selling them to the Mahdists.

“By this time, March had begun to deteriorate and Skull took over. He sent a few of his men to collect the boys he was demanding. Benson sent them back empty-handed, telling them that he needed the boys to work the farms.

“Skull sent a bigger force, but they were ambushed and wiped out. By that time I had joined him with my men.”

“Joined him,” said Milo. “You joined the reavers?”

“Believe me, Milo,” Gabriel answered. “It was not an easy decision. But, I spoke with the people. The farmers, the herders, townsmen, everyone I could reach safely. Benson was different. He was protecting his people. There was no selling off of the young men. He made sure that everyone was fed. He didn’t allow rape or theft or abuse of any kind.

“Sure, the people were, what, serfs. But he protected them. He stood up to March and Skull. Milo, they fought for him.” Gabriel was getting excited and his voice intense. Zach wondered if he was trying to convince himself or Milo.

“You mean he is like some Lord in the Medieval Ages?” asked Zach.

Gabriel slapped the table, “Exactly. The Lord had a guard. He kept the peace, protected his people. But Benson takes it farther. He protects his people even from his own men.

“Oh, I know it is not perfect. He does make the rules. He takes a portion of the harvest, but he stores a portion of it for bad times. His men do not have to work, but they police the towns. He has laws and holds Judgment Courts. The people’s concerns are heard.

“Milo, you must understand. We are building something here, albeit imperfect. It is a feudal existence, but it is safer and better than when the reavers were running wild.”

“We have something better, too. We have elections and government we all participate in. You have slavery.” Milo got up and began to pace. “Gabriel, you are establishing a kingdom. Something which we were all against.”

“No, we were not all against it,” said Gabriel in a tight, angry voice. “We were not against it at all. Under the Parson we had slavery. Slavery because of skin color or belief. We are a step above that, at least.”

Milo hung his head. The enslavement was not their finest moment, he knew. “All right,” he said quietly. “I am not proud of the slavery issue. I spoke against it. You did. Michael did. A lot of people did and it was becoming unpopular. It couldn’t have lasted much longer.

“Answer me this: can you leave if you want? Pack up your things and get out?”

“No one has tried after the first few months and John didn’t stop anyone who wanted to. But, they realized that it was bad out there. ‘Badass’ Smith was to the west and his men were animals. North of us were the Garcia brothers. They enjoyed watching women raped to death. They bet on how long they would last. They raced men after they cut off their hands to see how long they would last. They did unspeakable things to children. They drank from the skulls of their victims.

“There were others. Not so bad maybe, but worse than John. We fought several battles because the commoners from other territories were trying to get IN. We wiped out the Garcias.

We destroyed Smith. The Diggers. The Saints. Six or seven gangs. We became strong enough to hold off the other big gangs when the Reaver Wars started. Life is getting back to normal, or as normal as we can make it.

“There are still reaver gangs out there. This is as safe a haven as can be found, right now. Maybe we can make something better, later, but now we are trying to hold on by the skin of our teeth.”

Zach interjected, “Look. I would prefer that you embrace the old Republic and dance around the Liberty Tree, but we are just passing through. It is my firm belief that you can follow any kind of government you want. When you want to make adjustments, give us a call. For now, we would like some information.”

”I’m sorry. What ARE you doing here?”

Zach motioned Milo to sit down. “We are just passing through. We don’t want to interfere with you in any way. There’s something we need to look into to the east. Are there any reaver bands in that direction?”

“The ones there have been pretty much wiped out. John is sending out patrols to bring in the non-reavers so they can be protected.”

“And put to work on the land?” queried Leo.

Gabriel turned his face to Leo and hesitated. “Yes, that, too.”

“Okay, if we pass through Benson lands, what is on the other side?”

“Small reaver bands to the border of Missouri, beyond the Mississippi, we aren’t sure. We had a couple of patrols cross the river by one of the few bridges, but they didn’t come back. John does not have enough men to send a strong force across so he is keeping all of his troops back, for now.”

Zach sat back and motioned a trooper over. He asked him to bring the troop leaders and maps. When he was gone, Zach turned back. “You say you lost a couple of small patrols over the Mississippi? That’s pretty far east, isn’t it?”

“Like I said, we were trying to bring in civilians. Both to bolster our population and to deny conscripts to the other reavers who were at war. We sent five five-man patrols to Mississippi. They were supposed to herd people back to Springfield.

“Two of the patrols saw something across the Cairo Bridge, the only safe one on that part of the river. They went across and were never seen again. The other three patrols decided not to investigate. When the time is ripe, we will send a bigger reconnaissance force across.”

The trooper returned with the four troop leaders and advisors and the map case. Zach extracted the map he was looking for and spread it out on the table. “Here’s Cairo, where your troops disappeared. We are heading for New Madrid and the Mississippi. Do you have any idea what is down that way?”

Gabriel called over one of his men and they had a conference. He dismissed the man and turned back to the map. “Chas says that there may be a bridge across in Memphis. The I-55 route. We have not been that far south, but the reavers are pretty scattered in eastern Missouri. March left everything east of the Mississippi strictly alone and the reaver lords were ordered to stay on the west side of the river. The rumor was that he had promised you, Zach, to stay on the east side and was thumbing his nose at you.”

“Look, Gabriel,” Zach said, “we are going to Memphis and across the river. Can we have safe passage through Benson lands?”

Gabriel called Chas over again. “Chas, bring two men and give safe passage south to the Arkansas border. And, Chas, these are friends of mine.”

The big man grinned, showing spade-like, yellow teeth. “Sure, boss. Me and the boys will make sure they don’t stub any a toe.”

He turned to Zach. “When do we leave, boss?” Zach found that he called anyone in a superior position ‘boss’ and anyone in an inferior position ‘boy’.

They left an hour later, leaving Gabriel and Milo at the camp. They made good time and only had one encounter with another one of Benson’s patrols. A short word by Chas and they were allowed to pass without any difficulty. Two days later, the guides left them. They pointed the way to Memphis and walked back towards Springfield.

Todd asked, “That town over there Little Rock?”

Leo hefted his pack on his back. “Yep. We head up I-40, bypass the city and follow the highway to Memphis. Then it’s down the Mississippi to New Orleans. Just a walk in the park, boys, just a walk in the park.”

“Should we see if we can find some of the Arkansawyers, then?” Gregg asked.

Zach told him that the Arkansas settlements were back west and they did not have the time to take a detour like that. They set out for the east and found the bridge intact across the river. Todd took three men and crossed the bridge and scouted the far side. They signaled the all clear and the rest of the troopers moved across.

They found the juncture of I-40 and I-55 and began to parallel it to the east. They saw no living creature for the first two days.

As they crossed Pleasant Hill Road, east of Nesbit Mississippi, everything changed. There was the small herd of deer, birds and the chirping of crickets. Zach used his silenced rifle to kill a doe and they camped early to butcher the meat and have fresh venison for dinner.

The mood of the troopers changed, too. A cloud seemed to have lifted from them and they began to horse around and play practical jokes on each other, again. Leo told Zach that he had been getting worried about the silence and the morale of the troopers, but the mood seemed to have passed.

## Chapter 21

### First Contact

*Spring 2050*

*Pretty gloomy lately. Nothing to be heard. No birds, no animals. I hope it was just some kind of anomaly and not a sign that the area was a dead zone.*

*Shows how things are changing with Gabriel joining with a reaver band and the band setting itself up as overlords to an area. Pretty feudal. I wonder if my kids or grandkids are going to be treating with them or if one or the other will evolve or devolve.*

*I think all of this rebuilding is depressing. There always seems to be another area that needs help. Maybe I am getting old, but I am looking forward to sitting on my own porch and watching the aspens turn. Sarah would probably say “about time”. Let’s get this job finished and see.*

*The first thing we have got to find is someone local to help get things organized. Without that, this is just a battleground on which outsiders are fighting. I hope it doesn’t get like the religious wars in Europe with the Mahdists and us fighting back and forth over the same ground and the local population hunkering down and trying to survive.*

Late the next day they saw a thin trail of smoke on the horizon. They approached the small valley as darkness fell. Leo led one troop to the other side of the small farm and Gregg Appleton and John Santini dropped their packs and ghosted up to the buildings. The night was lit only by stars and it took them an hour to make the silent journey to the farm. When they approached the barn, they heard a low growl from the yard. They froze and began to ease themselves back up the hill.

The dog barked and the light in the house went out. They crouched quietly, hoping the dog would stop its noise. A board creaked by the house and a voice called, "I'm going to let this hound loose, you don't call out and tell me who you be."

Gregg hesitated a moment, then signaled John to ease himself behind a tree. He lay down and pressed himself to the ground. "We're looking for some food. We escaped and are pretty hungry."

"Stand up and come up to the house where I can see you. There be a lantern by the door of the barn, jest inside. There be matches, too. Light it up and let me see you good."

"How do we know you won't just shoot us?" Gregg replied.

"Boy, you don't do as I say and you are going to have Old Buck to worry about and a shot would be pleasant compared."

John heard a leaf rustle behind him and he knew that the rest of the troop was there and had followed them in. He stood and raised his arms, making as much noise as he could without making the farmer suspicious.

The two boys walked to the barn, talking to the farmer, speaking to cover the noise of the rest of the troop. They lit the lantern and showed themselves. The farmer stood up from his crouch behind the woodpile built as a bulwark by the porch. He carried a long shotgun and had a pistol tucked in the front of his pants.

As he bent to unhook the mastiff's chain, Zach said quietly, "Ease up, old son. There are more than a dozen of us out here and you wouldn't last two seconds. Just lower the gun and back away from the dog."



Gregg and John edged towards the barn door, ready to jump through the opening if the farmer turned his gun on them. The man hesitated, but finally straightened and lowered the barrel of the shotgun.

“Now. We are all going to be real friendly, here,” Zach said, standing and moving forward. When he reached the gate, he leaned his rifle against the fence and stepped towards the house. The black dog growled, but a word from the farmer silenced him.

“Got me fair and square. Don’t have much, take it and git. Just leave me the seed corn,” the middle-aged man said belligerently.

“The only thing we want from you, mister, is information,” Leo said from the corner of the house. The farmer hunched his shoulders at the new voice. “Do we have a nice little chat or not?”

“We can talk,” the man said. “Come to the house. Careful of Old Buck, he’ll take a steak out of you, he get the chance.”

Zach turned to Gregg and said, “Secure the area. Set guards and get our gear into the barn. Anyone not on duty, get them into the barn.”

Leo and Zach followed the man to the house, giving the thick-necked dog a wide birth. The man indicated the door and Zach smiled and said, “If I was a mistrusting kind of man, I would suspect that there are others in there waiting to take us prisoner or shoot us. Let me tell you, old son, the only regret these boys would have is having to bury us along with you.”

“Kate, it’s me, Pa. I’m coming in,” the big man yelled, not taking his eyes off of Zach.

He walked through the door and turned to watch the two men. He nodded grudging approval when they wiped their feet on the mat. Pa flipped the switch and lit the room. It was a typical farm house living room. There were several chairs and couches, tables and knickknack

shelves. By the stone fireplace a middle-aged woman and three children stood. She was holding a rifle and the oldest child, a boy, was gripping another shotgun.

“Ellen, Roger, put the guns down. There’s more outside.”

When the two weapons had been set in the gun rack, Zach smiled at the farmer’s family and said, “I’m Zach Banducci. Pleased to meet you. This is Leo Appleton.”

Ellen snorted, but at a sharp look from her husband, she returned the courtesy. She introduced the children as Roger, Rose and Little William. Her husband said, “I’m Big William Duvane. What do you want to know?”

“We can do better sitting,” suggested Zach.

Ellen and the children sat clustered on a couch and Big William sat in what was obviously his usual chair. Leo and Zach sat on another couch and Zach explained who they were and why they were here.

“I seen ‘em, Pa,” Roger interjected. “When I was out the other day hunting.”

Zach turned to the boy. “Who did you see, son?”

The boy hesitated. At a nod from his father, he continued, “Some riders. Strangers. Down near the Lake, Sardis Lake. I was on Elmer’s Hill and they were watering their horses.”

Leo leaned forward and smiled. “What did they look like? Reavers?”

Big William asked, “What are these ‘reavers’?”

Zach explained what they meant by the term and Roger nodded. “No, they weren’t raiders, what we call ‘em. These guys were kind of military. They had a guy with a green hat who looked to be in charge, like. I mean, the rest of the guys did what he told ‘em. And they didn’t have stuff with them like the raiders do.”

“What he means is,” interrupted Big William, “they didn’t have camp followers or trucks or wagons with gear. Isn’t that right, son?”

Roger nodded.

”Are these the people you told me about, earlier?”

Roger nodded, again.

Zach pressed the boy. “These men. How many were there? What did they do after they watered their horses?”

“There were some fifteen or twenty. I couldn’t get a good count because of the trees. The guy with the green hat was looking at a map and they finally rode off towards Hudson Road. I waited for them to get gone and headed back here.”

Leo and Zach exchanged glances. Zach turned towards the family and said, “Those men that Roger saw sound like Mahdists. We think that they are trying to expand by cutting off everything east of the river and turning it into part of the Caliphate. Do you understand the big picture, here?”

“We are pretty cut off, but we do have occasional visitors, mister. We aren’t ignorant!”

“You misunderstand me, Will. I don’t think you are ignorant, but you might be uninformed.”

Big William grumbled and nodded at Zach to go on.

Zach explained what had been happening in Missouri, Louisiana and the Caliphate. He told them of the suspicions the negotiators had and reiterated why they were on this side of the river. He went on to tell them what to expect if the Mahdists found them.

Ellen looked shocked and Roger determined. The two younger children looked bored. Big William scratched his chin and asked, “Where do you think these Mahdists are now? We

knew that New Jerusalem had been destroyed by the raiders. We heard of it from some travelers that called themselves Angels of the Lord or something.

“That’s when my oldest got took. These Angels were going through the country conscripting boys into the army. They were going to fight to get New Jerusalem back.

“We never saw Eddie again. I guess he’s gone, now.”

Leo expressed sympathy and said, “These Mahdists won’t stop at your son, William. You will all have to convert to Islam or pay a heavy tax. Roger, if he is fifteen or older, will have to join their army. If they have any trouble with him, they will start killing off his family until they have broken him or everyone is dead, then they will kill him.

“I don’t want to scare you, but they could take Rose or Ellen.”

“Yeah, but can they do it? I mean, can they take over half the United States?”

“Whether they can or not, doesn’t matter. They think they can and they will keep trying until they are stopped,” answered Zach.

“You gonna stop them?”

“Big William, I have twenty-seven men. We can knock off patrols like the one Roger saw, but they will come with a couple of hundred men and hunt us down. These plans are big and they are important. If they can take control of the Mississippi and a strip of land a hundred miles wide, if they can get enough troops recruited or moved in, then they could control the East. The longer they have to do it without any interference from us, the more likely they will.

“There are only three things that can stop them. One; the coalition we have put together that stopped the reavers in Louisiana. Two; if you and the people of the region can get organized enough to stop them. Three; if there is an organization to the east that they bump up against.”

Big William thought for a moment. He looked at Ellen and his family. He stared at the ceiling for a time and turned back to Leo and Zach. “There are folk scattered around the hills that I know. Most of us want to live peaceful. We don’t want to get involved with any of this stuff. I might could talk to them and see if any are willing to join in a fight with the Mahdists.

“But, what can you do to help? A couple have been in the army, but we won’t have an organized army, say. We have maybe, three hundred that we can gather, but you say they would have a lot more.”

“I don’t want to give you false hope, but I do have a plan,” said Zach. “Here’s what I propose to do...”

He went on to outline his plan. Leo interjected a few suggestions. Big William nodded at several places and added his own suggestions.

“I think that sounds reasonable. Roger, at first light you head for the people north of the lake. I’ll make a swing across highway and spread the word there. Ellen, gather what you can and take Rose and Little Will to Cedarville to you sisters.”

“Ma’am. Anything you want to protect, bury it or hide it for safekeeping,” Leo suggested.

Ellen looked scared, but determined as she led the younger children off to pack.

“I can give her the horse and Roger and I can use the mules,” said Big William.

Leo and Zach shook hands with the Duvanes and left the house to begin their own preparations. They called the troop leaders together and briefly explained their plans.

Todd Spires was to take a squad and find Ralph Meeker and enlist his Arkansawyers, if he could. Gary Miller was to take the second squad of Second Rangers, with Ihro, and scout the

area south of Lake Sardis and determine how far north the Mahdists had come with permanent settlements or camps.

Fourth rangers would split. The first squad would travel with Todd Spires and his men. They would get mounts from the Arkansawyers, if possible, and ride for Selden. Once there, Ed Tingle would radio Gunnison with a report. He would also meet with Raphael or Milo and recruit them for the expedition. Mike O'Malley would head for Texas and enlist the help of the Texans and the Louisianans to hit the Mahdists from the south. While he was in Ganado, Mike was to send a message to Ishtar Singh about the situation.

"If I know that old warhorse, he will have his troops on the march in an hour, with or without Gunnison's permission," said Zach.

As he finished giving orders, the five guides stepped forward. "What do you want us to do?" asked Paul Newton.

Zach was taken aback. "I thought you would go back to Selden with Ed. We really appreciate your help, but the bulk of our plan is out the window, now that we know where the Mahdists are."

"Mr. Zach," said Horace. "I come from down around Tupelo. I know those folks. They would be a big help to y'all."

Mason Montgomery piped up, "I had family up around Jackson, Tennessee. I could head up that way and see if they want to dance at this here ball."

"Kentucky might be too far to go for people, but I think I can make myself useful right here," offered Paul Newton, the jockey. Dave Whittle and Corey Tapwood nodded.

Leo grinned and said, "Welcome aboard, boys. Mason, you and Horace get going. We will gather at Hernando, Mississippi. If we get pressed, Jackson, Tennessee." The rangers and

the guides nodded and the meeting broke up. The men grabbed a few hours sleep before they left in the morning.

Zach tried the radio and managed to get a faint and scratchy reply from Arkansas. He asked for a dozen mounts to be brought to his men on the road, but didn't know if he got through before the connection was lost in the static.

Paul and Zach saw everyone off the next morning. They would stay at the Duvane farm until forced to move. Leo, Dave and Corey headed north to Hernando to see about establishing a camp. They escorted Ellen, Rose and Little Will.

In the quiet after the others left, Paul asked, "Do you think this will work, Zach?"

"I don't know, Paul. We shouldn't have been able to escape the Mahdists, years ago. We shouldn't have been able to stop them when they attacked us at Mitchell. We shouldn't have been able to take out the Aztecs or the reavers in Kansas, Missouri, Texas and Louisiana."

Zach laughed, "Hell, Paul, you should be talking to a ghost right now."

"Good, go on down and scare the bastards, then," answered Paul.

Every night Zach tried to pick up a transmission from the Texans or Arkansawyers. Several times he got something, but it was never clear enough to understand. Men and boys began to trickle in. The first were the Smiths; Gorman, his seven sons and his daughter. As Gorman explained it, Evelyn could shoot better than most boys in the area and she wouldn't be left out, anyway. They arrived in family groups and ones and twos.

Twenty-two came hustling in from Tupelo, all cousins of Horace Jones. Roger Duvane came back with sixteen, Big William with twenty-eight. By the end of the second week, there were nearly a hundred men with rumors of more in camp at Hernando. Zach was having a hard time getting them organized until Big William arrived and took over.

Their weapons were shotguns, hunting rifles, military M-25 and M-30s looted from local arsenals. There was even an old man carrying a sword. Leo asked everyone if they knew of artillery or tanks, but no one had.

Hunting parties spread out and kept the camp supplied with meat. Fish came in from Lake Sardis and canned vegetables and fruits were found in abandoned stores and houses. As horses were found, Leo, down from Hernando, formed mounted troops and drilled them.

Big William reported that the men were growing restless at the inactivity. They wanted to know when they would be fighting the Mahdists. Leo was worried about this, too. He pointed out that the longer they waited, the sooner the Mahdists would hear about the gather and send a force against them. Zach replied that that was what he wanted.

“If we hunt for them,” he told Leo, Big William and other leaders, “they will meet us when and where they are prepared. Leo, you know how they work. They have no respect for what they consider rabble. They will ride in and try to frighten us to death. What we want is for them to throw their forces at us piecemeal.”

They went off to quell the grumbling and he said to Leo that he hoped he was doing the right thing. “If these men are caught on the open road, they will probably panic and run. If we have them behind set positions, they might stand. They aren’t cowards, I know that, but you can bet that the Mahdists have been training hard.”

On the third week three hundred men, under Ralph Meeker, arrived from Arkansas. Zach sent them off to eat and introduced Ralph and his commanders to the locals. “Now is the time,” he began. “Leo, when the next report comes in from Gary, tell him that I want him to find a small band of Mahdists and kill a few, especially any Greens. I want a hornet’s nest stirred up, but not too big a one.”



As if on command, Timothy Stewart came running into camp. He reported that a hundred Mahdists were riding up the freeway. They were two hours away and riding slowly.

Leo blew out a plume of smoke and said, "Now, boss?"

"Now," answered Zach.

He asked Ralph to split his men into three groups and use them to spread out among the Mississippians to bolster them. Few of the latter had been in a pitched battle before and he wanted some veterans around. Big William assigned his men to the Arkansawyers and the Arkansas rangers were sent off to make sure the Mississippi Route 50 and the railroad bridges were down and to guard their flank from an enfilade attack

As Gary's men came in, Leo sent them to the east to protect that flank. The youngest boys were sent with them. Evelyn Smith refused to be sent off and Gorman said she could stay. A barrier had been erected across the highway and one group was stationed there. Another was in a stand of trees on the left of the highway and the last on the right.

A rider had been sent to Hernando to tell the Dave that the Mahdists had arrived and to bring the men from camp cautiously. As the rider spurred away, Zach wondered if they had enough to stop a well-organized attack. His one worry had been the lack of firepower, but Ralph had brought six machine guns and they were spread among the defenders.

Zach's plan was to have most of the men hidden and, when the Mahdist scouts appeared, a ragged volley fired by the rest at too great a distance. He wanted the Mahdists to think that there were only a few defenders behind a flimsy barricade.

Zach took up a position near the railroad where he had the best view of the highway. The Mahdist scouts appeared and the volley was fired. The scouts retired and the defenders waited.

Twenty minutes later, a group of cavalry approached led by an older man with a green sash. He took out a pair of binoculars and studied the barricade. He spoke to an aide and the man dispatched several riders to the east and west.

The men behind the barricade fired a volley, though the distance was too great for any accuracy. Even then, several of the mounts sidled at the noise or the bullets. The enemy commander calmly studied the barricade and the terrain on each side of the highway.

Zach was getting worried. This commander wasn't doing things as he had scripted them. The riders dispatched to the east and west he could understand. He knew that they would only find blown bridges and rough terrain. The usual response to a ragged volley would have been to charge with the cavalry and follow up with the infantry, putting his forces in piecemeal. Zach contemplated using his sniper rifle to take out the commander, but he didn't want to give anything away.

A few minutes later the staff moved off the road and allowed a small artillery piece to move forward. "Damn," thought Zach. "Leo, get out of there." He said a short prayer and trained his weapon on the enemy leader. As he was about to shoot, another ragged volley erupted from the barricade and someone said that they were running.

Zach fired and chambered another round. He looked through the scope and saw his target slowly fold in the saddle and fall to the ground. Several of his aides leapt off their horses and bent over him. Zach looked at the men at the artillery piece and saw they were in a state of confusion.

Out of the side of his mouth he told the man next to him to get up on the road and keep up a steady fire at the artillery piece. He wanted to have the Mahdists think that someone behind the barricade was killing the gunners.

As he waited for the next shot, he had another man set to give him a signal when the firing was going to start and trained his weapon on the group of men around the gun.

“Now,” his partner said.

Several shots rang out from the bridge and Zach shot the only man wearing any green. His target spun and fell, throwing the rest of the team into disarray. Zach took a quick look at the group around the fallen commander. There was an argument going on and, finally, one of the men, wearing a peacock feather in his slouch hat, apparently pulled rank. They all mounted and the body of their leader was picked up off the ground and slung over his horse. The artillery piece was dragged back and quiet settled.

Leo joined him and asked what had happened. Zach replied, “We had someone who knew what he was doing, that’s what. He was sending scouts and studying the situation before committing troops. So, I shot him and the head gunner or whatever he was.”

His friend looked at him and observed, “You think they will come back?”

“Oh, yeah,” Zach replied. “A couple of his staff who were arguing were wearing those peacock feathers. That used to mean they were part of the royal family, but who knows. Abdullah may have been lying and there is still a strong monarchy and they are royal family members. If he wasn’t lying, they may be members of the new government.

“I think that once they have settled the command question, they will come back. The important question is whether they will come back as the old Mahdists or this new kind. I would rather the old kind. They don’t think.”

Leo grunted and went off to check on the men who had returned to the barricade.

Zach took the time to run a clean rag through the barrel of his rifle and clean his stock of magazines. The body of the gunner lay in the mild spring sunshine and the only sound was the birds in the pines.

The flankers reported that the scouts sent out by the Mahdists had merely looked at the bridges and ridden off. No other activity had been reported.

Shortly after noon, the sound of trucks reached them. A few minutes later, three pickups, belching smoke, came into view. Each was equipped with a machine gun and an orderly group of cavalry followed them. There was no sign of the gun.

When the trucks came within a hundred yards of the barricade, they began to fire long bursts and the cavalry moved between them. The men behind the barricade fired sporadically and whenever they did, Zach picked off a gunner on the trucks or a cavalryman. He noticed that all the cavalry were wearing green.

At fifty yards the cavalry broke into a canter and several of them pulled out what looked like satchel charges. Zach no longer tried to hide the fact that he was there and began shooting the riders. He managed to cut down four or five, but the others threw the satchels and the whole cavalry group reversed course and charged back across the bridge.

Several of the charges were thrown back over the barricade and several never made it, but two exploded behind the barrier. Part of the barricade erupted and several bodies were tossed in the air. Smoke and dust obscured the scene and pieces of the barricade rained down.

The cavalry reversed direction again and charged at the barrier. The trucks surged forward and followed them, shoot bursts of machine gun fire over their heads. Zach sent a shot through the engine of one of the trucks and the tire of another. The latter truck swerved, hit the wall and ejected the gunner over the cab and into the river.

Leo had managed to assemble the majority of the defenders at the barricade and they opened up with machine guns and automatic weapons. The charge was thrown into confusion and few of the cavalry lived to cross back to their lines.

All three of the trucks were wrecks. Zach had killed five gunners before disabling the trucks. The roadway was littered with the bodies of horses and men. Cries of pain broke the silence. One man staggered over the bridge, arms folded over his stomach. His shirtfront and pants were soaked with blood. He took several more steps; fell to his knees and onto his face.

Leo was busy shoving broken pieces of the barricade into the breach and organizing the survivors. Several of the men wanted to attack, but he was able to keep them behind the barrier.

An hour later, the defenders heard the sound of marching. Over the road, columns of men approached. Zach breathed a sigh of relief. "At least this is going according to plan," he thought. He had sent runners along the line to warn that the infantry was coming next. He told the fighters to try and shoot the officers and non-coms in green.

He sent another runner north to intercept the troops from Hernando and direct them to swing around the lake and take the camp, if there was one. Should the camp fall, the men were to take up positions between the infantry and their camp. When, and if, they were thrown back, Zach wanted them to be caught in a trap and surrender.

It took a great deal of shouting and pushing to get the janissaries in line. From this, Zach knew that these were green and lightly trained troops. They were probably recent recruits. The remainder of the cavalry was lined up behind the rows of infantry to keep them from bolting.

Zach was appalled. He knew that they were going to attack in a line, trying to break the defenses of the bridge by sheer numbers. The slaughter would be horrendous.

He identified the fop as the new commander and was tempted to kill him immediately. The fact that he did not know where the Hernando men were stayed his hand. He did not want them falling back as their camp was being attacked and have his troops caught in the trap they were trying to set.

He motioned another runner to him and ordered the man to reiterate his orders to target officers and non-coms. He immediately regretted his action. Either the defenders would obey the original orders or not and all he accomplished was to increase the chance of being discovered by sending men running up and down the line.

There seemed to be an argument about the attack between the leader and several of his subordinates. Zach watched the exchange until the new commander made a cutoff motion with his hand and signaled the advance.

Zach sighted on a tough-looking non-com with several green ribbons sewn on the sleeve of his jacket. He was not sure of the significance of the ribbons, but the man looked like he knew what he was doing. Zach lined up on the man's chest and fired. A dark spot blossomed on the left breast pocket of the jacket and the man dropped. His squad, which had begun to spread out and sprint for cover from the disabled vehicles, was thrown into confusion. They hesitated and clustered behind one of the disabled trucks.

As another man with a green baseball cap advanced, a shot from the barricade hit him and he collapsed like a rag doll.

Zach had gathered several marksmen to his position and he instructed them to fire at the knot of officers around the commander of the Muslims. "Don't hit the one with the peacock feather. I don't want them retreating until the Hernando guys get set. Just knock off some of the others and make him nervous."

By this time, the commander was screaming at the lines of troops. The cavalry walked their mounts forward, pressuring the infantry to advance. They did this reluctantly and Zach began targeting the cavalry, killing three of them before they dismounted and continued to press the infantry.

Leo had instructed his machine gunners to try and pin the infantry down behind their cover and the attackers began bunching in the middle of the bridge. The hunters of Leo's small command began to target the officers and non-coms and the janissaries began to edge backward.

By this time, the infantry was a mass and the machine guns could have slaughtered them. The officers, non-coms and cavalry were being decimated and unable to force the infantry forward.

Suddenly, the officers, who had withdrawn when they started taking casualties, returned, riding hard. They summoned the remnants of the cavalry and sent them south along the road. Just before he was killed, another staff officer gave an order to one of the few infantry officers who had survived. The man saluted and turned to his men and shouted an order.

Before Zach got a clear shot, the man executed one of the janissaries and was taking aim at another. When he turned, he apparently ignored the danger presented by the defenders and exposed himself. Zach put a shot through his temple and he dropped.

Leo ordered his men to cease fire and shouted, "Throw down your weapons and surrender."

A non-commissioned officer pointed his M-25 at the janissaries in front of him and gave them an order. While he had his weapon trained in front of him, another janissary shot him from the side. This began a general movement to fire on the remaining officers and non-coms. When

they were all dead or wounded, the janissaries began to throw their weapons onto the road and stand with their hands raised.

Leo ordered them to move to the field across the river from where Zach was positioned and sit on the ground. By this time, there was a barrage of firing from the south. A few minutes later, the Hernando contingent, led by Dave Whittle, cautiously advanced up the road.

Leo stepped from behind the barrier and met him on the bridge. The two men shook hands and waited for Zach, Big William Duvane and Ralph Meeker to join them. When the other men arrived, Dave grinned and said, "Worked great. We took the camp without a loss and met some fancy officers riding back. When we knocked a few out of their saddles, they skedaddled and a while later a few cavalry came riding up. We wiped them out, with a couple of our boys getting scratches and thought we would mosey on up and see if we could pull your fat out of the fire."

Zach rolled his eyes. "Well, since you didn't do anything worthwhile or strenuous, why don't you have your boys watch the children after you search them," he said, pointing to the sixty or so janissaries sitting miserably in the field.

After Dave left, Zach turned to Big William. "Can you organize some tools so we can bury the dead? Have the prisoners do the heavy work of clearing everything up, but have your men pick up the weapons and search the bodies for knives and hide-out guns or whatever."

"Ralph, can you take a look at the machine guns on the trucks to see if they can be repaired or is they are in working order. I'm afraid that I may have put the trucks out of commission, though."



The two men nodded and left. Leo slapped him on the back and congratulated him on his success. “Your plan worked to perfection. We nailed a bunch of raggies and captured a bunch of boys we can turn into troops for Mississippi. You should be proud of yourself.”

Zach staggered from the blow and moved his shoulders to make sure that there was nothing broken. He turned to Leo and said, “Well, we are only half done. We have to find and free the families of these boys or the Mahdists will start killing them. We also have to come up with a plan or we are going to be hip deep in green.”

Leo gave a wry smile. “Take ten seconds and revel in the moment, why don’t you?”

“Yeah, you’re right. We did a good job. Revel. Revel. Okay, back to work.”

Zach went to the field and spoke to the prisoners. He explained about Jefferson, Texas, Kansas, the Mahdists and the reavers. He went on to explain that they had to free their families or they would suffer the consequences. Big William was introduced as the local leader of the effort to unite the Mississippi area and push out the Mahdists.

When he was done, a hand was raised by one of the young men. Big William recognized him and was asked, “It is time for evening prayer, sir, is there somewhere private we can go?”

Zach threw a surprised look at Leo.

Big William rubbed his face with a big hand and replied, “You don’t have to pray to Allah, any more, you know.”

“Yes, sir, I know. But I must. It is written.”

Big William waved to a corner of the field and told the young man to use that for his prayer meeting. Three other prisoners joined him and walked to the area indicated and knelt in prayer. William joined Zach and Leo and asked what he should do. They told him that everyone

was free to choose their own way, but that the Muslims should be kept from the other boys and, until they could be transported to New Mecca, imprisoned.

Meanwhile, Big William's men were moving among the other prisoners, greeting acquaintances and handing out food and water. Gorman Smith brought over two of the janissaries and introduced them as cousins, Joseph Carter and James "Spider" Smith.

They said that the families of the captured troops were being held in Greenville, Mississippi. The Mahdists had organized it as another town in the chain that ran from Gulfport through Baker, Louisiana to Natchez, Vicksburg and Greenville, Mississippi. Vicksburg, because of its strategic location, was the administrative center for Mississippi and Louisiana.

"So, all of these towns have garrisons and hostage families?" Leo asked.

"Um, yeah, I think so," answered Joseph.

"Think or know?" interjected Zach.

James spoke up, "Each of those places has a training camp and a kind of local mayor who is responsible for recruiting and training a bunch of troops. The families of the trainees are kept in town with a bunch of religious police watching them. They send out recruiters to the east and bring in more men and families."

"How many of these recruits are there? Do you know?" queried Big William.

"I don't know, maybe sixty or so before they move another group of Muslims up the road and start again. We just came up two days ago. There were thirty Muslims and their families and the cavalry. Some of the guys said that more Muslims are coming up from Gulfport.

"When they get to a new place, they start gathering in families with the cavalry. They start training and going out with the new recruits."

Zach held up his hand. “Sorry, I’m getting a little confused, here. What I’m hearing is that the Mahdists find a town, set up a government, send out the cavalry, bring in families and form the young men into their military. I take it they leave a skeleton force of Mahdists behind for administration and troop leaders. The rest of the Mahdists move up the road and start again. Is that right?”

“Sort of,” answered James.

“‘Sort of’ isn’t a yes or no,” complained Zach.

“Yes, then. That’s what they do. They drop off a couple to be the mayors and his staff, some who form this police to keep the families in line and ten or twelve to run the army unit and recruit and train.”

“Finally. Thanks. I noticed that there are a few of you boys that are really converted. Do you have any idea how many?” asked Leo.

“Naw. There’s probably only a few in every troop.”

Zach thanked the two boys and dismissed them. He asked Leo to see what the other prisoners thought about an offer to join Big William’s militia. “See about getting them weapons and equipment and, maybe, some training and horses. William, I think we need a meeting to see what we are going to do about this.”

## Chapter 22

### The March South

*Spring 2050*

*Man, oh, man. Looks like we are going to have to liberate Mississippi, now. Carl was right about the Mahdists. They just want us lulled into a sense of false security so they can make the grab of the eastern U.S. Luckily, we found out before they got too strong.*

*Big William and Gorman Smith look likely to form the nucleus of a government or movement to set up Mississippi like the rest of the areas, except for Benson controlled reaver area. That's going to resemble some sort of feudal duchy.*

*Oh, well, that's up to Raphael and Gabriel.*

*From the looks of things, we are going to have to organize Tennessee, Kentucky, parts of Indiana and Ohio to fence the Caliphate in. I am hoping that our five guides and the Mississippians can handle it. I am getting too old for this running around and sleeping on the ground stuff.*

*In the short term, however we are going to have to clean up the mess here in Mississippi. The janissaries, except for the converts, have decided to join the effort. I am hoping to hear from the Kansans, Texans, and Louisianans and from Jefferson. From what Gorman's cousins said, there aren't very many hardcore Mahdists in any of the towns except for Greenville and Vicksburg. .*

*Unless they have better communications than we do, we might be able to keep them isolated and roll them up. If we could organize everyone to hit the towns north of Gulfport at the same time, we would be able to keep them from supporting each other. First things first, however. We have to take Greenville.*

*Funny thing. When I asked James and Joseph about the artillery piece, they just smiled and said a shell got stuck in the breech. When I looked at it in camp, it was like someone had tried to load a .22 with a .25 caliber shell. A couple of Big William's men had to really work at getting the shell unstuck. I bet the boys had this planned all along.*

*Leo wants to 'deprogram' the kids who converted, but I say that they can follow who they want and we should send them to the Caliphate with their families, if they want to go. We don't have any right to convert them against their will any more than they have the right to convert us against ours. Meanwhile, Gorman says that there is still a strong jail in Granada, Mississippi and some men have been detailed to get them there and guard them.*

*Corey has been sending groups down from Hernando as they arrive and we have almost three hundred Mississippians, a bunch from Tennessee and a few from Missouri. With Meeker's men, that makes a fair size force. Tomorrow we march on Greenville.*

*Tonight I am hoping that I can contact some of the troops from our other allies.*

Before going to bed, Zach tried to contact the other groups he was hoping had been mobilized and were heading towards Mississippi. He got through to Ishtar Singh and learned that he had three troops with him and had joined the Texans with four troops. They would be meeting up with a troop of men from Louisiana under a training cadre from Texas. They were at Alexandria, Louisiana.

Zach introduced him to Big William and Gorman Smith and listened to them make plans for a coordinated assault on Natchez and Greenville in two day's time. Looking over a map, Zach saw that it would isolate Vicksburg. He suggested that Ishtar's group block the southward road and let the Mississippians and their allies take Vicksburg. After that, they would join up and take Baker.

Ishtar blared that he would be very disappointed if he couldn't lead the attack on Baker. "After all, you have had all the fun, so far."

Gorman gave Zach a puzzled look. Zach laughed and said, "You have to meet him."

They signed off and left to see to their men. They decided to leave a small force in Sardis to provide a covering force if they were forced to retreat and to guard the supplies captured from the Mahdists. This enabled Duvane to give the older men a purpose without telling them they were too old for the coming campaign. They put the old man with the sword in command. He had been a soldier in the Iraq war forty years ago.

The captured janissaries and the younger men, and Evelyn Smith, had been organized into troops of twenty, each led by one of the rangers. They had little training and Meeker's Arkansawyers and the rest of the rangers were going to be used as the spearhead of the attack. Zach and Leo were worried about casualties among the untrained troops, but nothing could be done about it.

They had managed to salvage one of the trucks and all of the machine guns. The artillery piece was hitched to the truck and the shells were loaded into the bed.

A third of the Arkansawyers and their scouts and a third of the untried troops would attack from the north. Fourth Rangers and another third of the remaining men would attack from the south. The rest of Second Rangers would take the last of the troops and attack from the east. Paul Diggs hurried off with his men, followed by Ihiro Masamoto and the last third a couple of hours later.

The Arkansas rangers captured a courier late in the afternoon and he was brought into camp. He wore a small green ribbon over his left breast pocket and he proved to be another convert. His dispatch was from the governor of the district in Vicksburg. It requested his

expected report on progress. The courier was bound and three men detailed to take him to the jail in Granada.

The ranger was sent back and the southward march continued. When they were five miles from town, they halted and made a cold camp in the woods. The rangers maintained their vigil and woke the camp at three in the morning.

They advanced to the outskirts of town and met John Ross of the rangers. He reported that all was quiet and there were no sentries in evidence, though there could be one in the church belfry. Zach advanced with Ross and used his night vision scope to survey the town. When he did not spot any movement, he signaled the advance.

The rangers filtered into town, followed by the Arkansas troopers and, in a third line, the Mississippians. They advanced street by street and finally found the Mahdists in some new warehouse on the west side of Harbor Front Road, across from the railroad tracks. Six warehouses were circled by a fence of barbed wire. Another had two guards posted at the doors. The last building had the windows covered with plywood and a bar across the door. Zach whispered to Gorman Smith, "The families are probably behind the fence, the boarded up building is the barracks and the other building is the administrative building. I doubt that there are many weapons in the barracks. The rest of the guards are probably in Admin."

"Ross," said Gorman, "can you take out the guards in front of the Admin building without any noise?"

"If we can borrow a couple of pistols and silencers from Zach's rangers."

Gorman looked the question at Zach and he nodded, asking John to send up the squad of Second Rangers. John left and a few minutes later a dozen of the Arkansas Rangers were moving towards the building. Zach ordered Gary Miller to take his men and surround the

barracks. He was to make sure that no one left that building while the Arkansas Rangers secured their building.

Using his night vision scope, Zach searched the grounds of the prison yard and saw no guards or movement. He trained his scope on the two guards just as they were hit with multiple shots. One of the guards was caught before he could fall and his weapon snatched from his hand. The other dropped his rifle and collapsed.

Everyone froze, but the sound went unnoticed. John Ross waved towards Zach and entered the building. After a tense ten minutes, he appeared back at the door and signaled the all clear.

Gorman waved his men down towards the cluster of buildings and the Fourth Rangers and the first squad of the Second Rangers was seen moving in. Big William, moving silently for such a big man, joined Zach, Leo and Smith at the Administration Building. Gorman moved to the barracks and stood beside the door. He slapped the flat of his hand on the panel and shouted, "You boys in there, we are the Mississippi Militia and we have taken over this camp. Stack any weapons and prepare to come on out."

"I hope they don't have anything bigger than cap guns," muttered Leo. "Anything bigger will go through the walls like a hot knife through butter."

A rumble of voices was heard from within the building. Finally, a single voice called out to Gorman. He answered, "We have taken over the rest of the camp. We are NOT negotiating, here. Come on out here or we will dynamite the place."

Smith took a quick look at the array of men standing in front of the building and he threw the bar off its hooks. The door opened outward and a hesitant janissary stepped out with his



hands raised. He was directed down the steps and ordered to kneel in the dust near the fence of the prison.

Prisoners were cautiously stepping out of the camp buildings and clustering near the fence. Big William and several of his staff went to reassure them that they were safe. He sent one of his men to find the keys to the gate and entered the compound. He gathered the prisoners and told them what was happening and how they were to proceed.

Meanwhile, the few janissaries had been searched and allowed to stand. Gorman stood on the porch and gave them the same explanation that Big William had just finished giving to their families. These men had been excused from duty when the rest of the force had been marched to fight at Sardis.

Big William and Gorman Smith met and discussed how best to proceed. The janissaries and their families were getting restless and some were demanding to be released from the prisoner compound. Finally, Big William called for silence. He stood on a stump and held up his hand.

“The first thing, I want anybody who converted to Muslim or Islam or whatever to stand near building one.” He pointed to the leftmost of the prison barracks.

When no one moved, he said, “Nobody’s going to get hurt or anything.”

Zach tapped him on the arm and asked to speak. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he stepped down and Zach took his place. He began by introducing himself and explaining how things stood in the U.S Confederacy of States. He went on to outline their relations with the Caliphate. “Anyone who wants to live in the Caliphate is free to do so. I give you my word that you and a reasonable amount of goods, say a wagon load, will be escorted to the Mahdists.

“You understand that we have other operations against the Mahdists in Mississippi and we can’t have their supporters running around the countryside. You will be kept here, safely, and released once we have the situation in hand.” He stepped down and Duvane took his place.

A family moved, hesitantly, to stand in front of the indicated barracks. They were joined by two more. Big William ordered the remaining families to get their possessions and assemble in front of the gate. When they had gathered, Gorman spoke to them, “We have several young men in Granada who want to join the Caliphate. I’m going to read their names and then I am going to let you out.” He read the list of names and ordered the gates opened.

“We never talked about it,” said Big William to Zach, “but what do we do now? We got all these people to care for and the prisoners and all. What did you do?”

Gorman joined them and nodded at the last question.

“William, Gorman, now you are going to have to get organized. You could send all of these people home, but the next set of reavers or Mahdists or crazies will just do the same thing. You are going to need to get some form of government set up. Troops. A way to communicate between communities and individual farms. You know, get organized.

“Look, the first thing I would do is get all these citizens of Mississippi together and have a town meeting. Find someone to take charge, find out if they even want to organize.

“We aren’t out of the woods, yet. We still have to take Vicksburg, Baker and Gulfport. Then we have to return the surviving Mahdists to the Caliphate. There is a lot of work to do and we don’t have much time to get going.”

Big William and Gorman had a short discussion with several of the men on their staff and the staff members scattered to start the freed captives and the Mississippian Militia members

moving towards the town hall. Leo grumbled about the wasted time, but Ralph Meeker and Zach quieted him down.

John Ross came up and asked what to do with the Mahdists. His men had disarmed the six members of the Purity and Obedience Council, as the police were called and the three administrators. The building had been emptied of weapons and the families and the others had been gathered in the communal dining area of the living quarters. Gorman Smith asked him to move them to the prison yard and tell them to find places for themselves in the barracks.

When that was done, Zach urged Big William, Gorman and their staff to head for the meeting and get things going. He told them he wanted to be on the road at first light. Zach promised to safeguard the prisoners.

When the Mississippians had left, Ralph, Zach and Leo set the Arkansawyers and Jeffersonians to guard, scout and camp duties. Second Rangers were assigned to setting up the camp. They strung ropes to pen the horses along the river, started cooking in the communal kitchen and clearing the quarters upstairs. Fourth Rangers were assigned to guard the prisoners and a contingent of the Arkansas Rangers scouted towards the south. The rest of the Arkansawyers were told to eat and sleep. They would be taking over assigned duties at midnight.

While these preparations were going on, Zach had the mayor brought in to his old office. Leo sat behind the desk, flanked by Ralph Meeker, John Ross, Zach and another hard-looking, bearded Arkansawyer named Paul Vitters. Paul had a habit of cracking his knuckles and he could set his normally open, friendly face into a fierce scowl. In front of the desk and within the curve of the other four, a chair had been placed.

The Mahdist was escorted in and seated in the straight-backed chair. He surveyed the five and said with a supercilious smirk, “Ah, intimidation.”

Leo returned the smile and answered, “Judges.”

The smirk vanished. “Judges? Is this a trial?”

“Of course, what else? You are charged with murder, invasion of Mississippi, slavery, kidnapping, oh, a host of charges, too numerous to articulate here. It isn’t really necessary to come up with any more, since any of the above carry the death penalty.”

“What! You cannot do this. Where is my lawyer? I, I need to be able to mount a defense. I represent my government, I have immunity. They must be notified.”

Leo gave him an amused frown. “Sorry, buddy. You may not have noticed, but we are in charge. As such, we make the rules. An attorney won’t be necessary, since you are guilty. The old immunity defense won’t work, we have heard it before. Your government will be informed when we send your head to them in a box.

He looked around at the others. “Was there something else? I don’t want to be unfair before we execute him.”

The other shook their heads. The only sound in the room was the cracking of Paul’s knuckles.

“Wait,” the mayor blurted out, his self confidence gone. “I will help you. Just let me and my family go. I will tell you anything you want.”

“I don’t think there is anything we want,” answered Zach. He paused. “Well, we might be interested in how many people are in Vicksburg, Baker and Gulfport. Not that they would have enough to stand against the Mississippi Militia, the Arkansas Battalion, the Texas Rangers,

the Louisiana Tigers, the Kansas Jayhawkers and the Tennessee Volunteers. Not to mention our troops from Jefferson.”

The Mahdist blanched as Zach called the role.

“Come to think of it,” Zach continued. “We probably should leave him for Big William and the Mississippians. I would just shoot him, but they may have more interesting ways of execution.”

The mayor wrapped his shreds of dignity around himself and said quietly, “I am not afraid to die. Allah will reward me.”

“Fair enough,” said Ralph. “Paul, take him and his family out and pour pork lard down their throats, put a bullet in their heads and wrap them in pigskins before you buy them.”

“You would kill my family?” the Mahdist said in horror.

“Don’t you kill the janissaries’ families?”

“But that is to instill discipline. What you are suggesting is murder.”

Leo sat back in his chair and laughed. “I don’t think they would make that distinction.”

The man sat with bowed head for a few minutes with Paul standing over his chair. When he looked up, everyone in the room knew he was beaten. The threat to his family was the final straw.

“I can help you. And I will under one condition. My family is not harmed.”

Zach leaned forward, his hands clasped. “Information first, promises second.”

Resignedly, he answered, “As you wish. Governor Jamal Harkness is coming to Greenville in two day’s time. He always inspects the new settlements to, well, he always inspects the new settlements.”

Leo leaned forward. “To’?” he asked.

“He is building his harem.”

Leo sat back. “Ah,” he said. Continuing, he asked, “How many troops will he have with him.”

For the first time since he was brought in, the mayor smiled. “He believes in pomp and ceremony. He will have his palace guard of fifty men, probably his latest concubines, four or five wagons for supplies and two hundred janissaries.”

They pumped him for other information over the next hour until he had been wrung dry.

Ralph nodded to Paul. “Take him back to the compound. If his information proves false, he can watch his family die first.”

After they had left, Leo turned to Ralph. “That was a little blood-thirsty, wasn’t it?”

“Well, it might keep him honest.”

They discussed the news they had gleaned and Zach called in a trooper and instructed him to go to town and find Gorman Smith’s cousins, Joseph or James and bring them back.

Zach retrieved his map case and the four of them were pouring over the maps when Big William, Gorman, Joseph Carter and ‘Spider’ Smith arrived. They were brought up to speed and Zach turned to Joseph and James.

“How would you boys like to join the Mahdists, again?”

At their confused look, he explained his plan, “We don’t want the janissaries to get in the middle of the ambush we plan. But, once the shooting starts, there won’t be any easy way to tell them to get down. What we want you to do is become couriers from Greenville, meet the governor, give him some song and dance about how everything is being prepared and going fine and then, spread the word among the janissaries to take out any Mahdists with them and get out of the line of fire. We will get Mr. Mayor to write something for you to give the governor.

“We take care of the Royal Guard and Vicksburg will be left pretty well defenseless.”

A copy of the mayor's signature was found and Big William found someone who could forge it well enough. A false, but glowing report was written and signed. Joseph and James mounted up and rode south with a member of the Second Rangers for safe passage.

The main body of men, including the Greenville janissaries, would follow at first light. The two false couriers would lead the governor up Mississippi Route 1. Between Foote and Erwin, at the north end of Lake Washington, was where the ambush would take place. There were scrub pines growing along the road which would provide adequate cover. A smaller force would be hiding on the Lake Washington side of the road to stop escapees.

The Second, Fourth and Arkansas Rangers were sent at midnight to take up positions and screen the advance of the main party. They would give warning if the governor's train had made better time than expected.

At false dawn, the leaders roused their men and ordered them to grab something to eat and be ready to march in fifteen minutes. Grumbling, the troopers scrambled from their bedrolls and dressed. With the Arkansas contingent leading, they marched out of town. The janissaries formed flankers.

They had not been on the road more than an hour when word reached the head of the column that they were being followed. Big William Duvane and Gorman Smith formed their men in the thickets on each side of the road. Zach brought half the Arkansawyers with him and joined them.

A few minutes later, several horsemen appeared. Zach stood up and grinned, waving his hat. He recognized Raphael, Mason Montgomery and Horace Jones leading a large contingent of

men. They met and shook hands. Raphael was introduced to the leaders of the Mississippi troops and they resumed the march, Zach explaining the plan.

“You certainly have things in turmoil, Zach,” observed Raphael, with as much of a smile as he ever showed. “We almost got shot several times on the way down.”

“You know how it goes, old son. They just don’t trust strangers around here.”

Raphael was leading a hundred men, twenty-five of them from John Benson. Gabriel had convinced the reaver that it would be good for relations if he supported the Mississippians. The Missourians were a mix of reavers and natives and showed Benson’s attempt to lose his reaver roots and govern his area of Missouri with equality towards both groups.

Mason and Horace had each collected nearly a hundred fighters, so the expedition numbered almost seven hundred men, which was too large to control effectively. Gorman Smith and his children took as many men as could be mounted, around two hundred, on a wide swing to the east and south. His group was to cut the road behind the governor. He was warned not to fire at the janissaries, if they broke and ran.

When they reached the ambush site, Big William kept two hundred of the Mississippi Militia as a covering force and Zach and Leo led the rest south. Raphael and Mason’s Tennessee Volunteers crossed the road and took cover in the trees near Lake Washington. Ralph Meeker and the rest of the Mississippians hid on the east side of the road. The scouts were still falling back ahead of the governor.

Morning passed and the ambush force napped, chewed on cold biscuits and jerky or talked quietly. About one, the first of the scouts reported in. There were ten men riding point for the column and they were five minutes away. Todd Spires identified them as nine janissaries and one Mahdist. Zach ordered him to take his squad and take them when they got north of



Erwin. They were to use silencers and kill the Mahdist. Hopefully, the janissaries had been briefed by Joseph or James and would know to surrender.

The advance guard passed and, ten minutes later, the head of the column appeared. Fifty Mahdist guardsmen were first. They were followed by a fringe-topped surrey with the governor and three women. A machine gun truck followed the surrey. The gunner was seated in the truck bed, sleeping. Five wagons trailed the truck and the janissaries followed the wagons.

Zach saw that Joseph was riding with the palace guard. He sighted to the left of the boy's head and fired. The silenced bullet came close enough for him to hear it. As Zach had hoped, he immediately dropped from his mount. Zach shifted his aim to the officer in charge of the guard, who was looking at Joseph with a puzzled expression.

Zach's shot took him through the throat as he suddenly bent to look at or talk to the fallen rider. As the commander fell, several volleys were fired at the guard. More than half were killed with the first shots. The second volley emptied more saddles and the few that managed to stand and draw their weapons were cut down by the third volley.

Several men bolted towards the lake, but Raphael's men annihilated them before they reached the trees.

The machine gunner was cut down immediately and the driver of the truck turned it into the ditch as he slumped over the wheel. The driver of the surrey and one of the horses were killed and the women huddled on the floor of the vehicle as the governor bent over and covered his head with his arms.

Several shots were heard from the rear of the column and Zach quickly scanned the milling riders with his scope. Several empty mounts testified to the fighting, but it soon tapered off and the janissaries sat their horses with their hands in the air.

The only casualty among the ambushers was a twisted ankle one of the Mississippians suffered when he was jumping around celebrating their victory. The few shots the guards got off went wild.

The leaders advanced on the surrey and the governor was pulled from his seat. The women were placed under guard with the wagon drivers and janissaries. Men were assigned to collect weapons and horses. Others put down wounded horses and checked for surviving guardsmen. Big William rode up with the seven survivors of the point guard.

The governor was a fat bureaucrat with jowls covered by a sparse beard. He had remained cowering on the roadbed while the orders were being given. Paul reached down and grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to his feet.

“Governor, suh, you are a prisoner of the great state of Mississippi,” Paul growled.

They had the janissaries collect the bodies and bury them, then they were questioned and the few converts were to be escorted back to Greenville to be incarcerated with the converted families and the Mahdists. The rest were divided into Mississippi and Louisiana contingents. The wagons contained supplies and baggage for the governor and the women.

The women were the governor’s concubines. They ranged in age from fifteen to twenty-two. They were freed. The governor was questioned and turned over to the guards. He confirmed that there were only ten Mahdist trainers and forty-three recruits left in Vicksburg, along with seven clerks and twenty members of the Purity and Obedience Council.

The governor was turned over to Big William. He included him with the rest of the prisoners and ordered them taken to Greenville.

“What, now?” asked Zach.

“Vicksburg, now,” replied the Mississippian.

The rangers were sent to scout the road and the rest of the expedition formed up and moved down Highway One after them. They camped that night at Gary, Mississippi, a town of half a dozen streets. The town had been thoroughly looted, but not burned.

The next morning, just before they planned on stopping for noon break, a grinning Kyle Summers galloped in. He slid his horse to a halt in front of Zach and said, "Ishtar Singh is coming."

Without waiting to hear more, Zach, Leo, Raphael and the rest of the expedition's leadership thundered down the road. A mile south, they found the huge Sikh sitting in the middle of the road, grinning, with Ed Black by his side.

"My friends, what kept you?" he bellowed. "I have been lonely for your company."

They shook hands and pounded each others backs and introduced their companions. Ishtar led the way off the road to his camp where the midday meal was ready. They sat in the pavilion and ate.

"What are you doing here?" Zach asked. "You were supposed to seal off Vicksburg to the south while we took it."

"Zach, my friend," replied Ishtar Singh with a wide smile bisecting his face. "We met a little bird on the road. A nice young bird carrying dispatches to Natchez. Well, we had already taken Natchez, so what was the point in the dispatches. This bird sang for us and told us how few Mahdists were left in this new capitol of Persia, this city of Tehran.

"Knowing that you would want to rejoin your family as soon as possible, I thought to myself that if my good friend, Zach, did not have to pause and fight for this city, then my good friend, Zach, could be with his beloved Sarah. So, I did this for you. My good friend, John

Lamont, and I rode into Tehran, which had been Vicksburg. There we found fifty good little Muslims training on a cricket pitch.”

“Football field?” interjected Leo.

“Quite right, friend Leo. A football field. Too small for a cricket pitch. But, now, we get back to my story, please. We convinced the Mahdists to come with us to the City Hall, where we found clerks and those fanatical religious police. Then we put all of them in the city jail, where they would be safe. All, except for the poor boys who did not want to be good little Moslems, of course.

“Then, John Lamont, my very good friend, who knew how I wished to see my excellent friends, Zach and Leo, told me to go and find you. Which I did. Now, tell me of your harrowing adventures for which your excellent wives will scold you.”

Zach and Leo laughed. “Our harrowing adventures were not much. We met Big William and he organized some people, Ralph joined us, we got more people and fought some Mahdists. Raphael joined us and we took Greenville and freed a lot of non-Mahdists. Then we captured the governor and found you lost on the road.”

“Excellent, excellent. Tell it just that way and your wives will not break plates over your heads.”

“Speaking of wives, how is Siri?”

“She is very fine. Young Banda is a sturdy little ruffian, which he gets from me, but he is very loud, which he gets from Siri, I am sure,” replied Ishtar Singh, seriously.

He leaned in and said, “Zach, I must speak to you. We have been in this area for several days. We have taken Natchez and Vicksburg, but there has been very little excitement. I am very disappointed, you must know. I might as well use my kirpan to dig potatoes. You,

however, have had battles with the Mahdists and the reavers. You must not keep them all to yourselves, my friend.”

Zach slapped the old warrior on the shoulder and promised him his share of fighting. Leo offered to give him his, also. They finished lunch and the table was cleared for a conference.

The Sikh reported that Natchez and Vicksburg were being held by Texans and the people and troopers who had been freed. A few janissaries and Mahdists escaped from the attack on Natchez. The rest of the surviving Mahdists and their families were being kept under guard in the town jails. He encouraged Zach and the other expedition leaders to hurry and attack the rest of the Mahdists before they could become organized.

Big William suggested that they continue towards Baker, Louisiana without delay. He wanted to take that last outpost of the Mahdists and pin the remainder against the sea. Ed Black had already reported that no more Mahdists were being allowed passage to the Texas coast.

The rest of the leaders agreed that the faster the Mahdists threat was eliminated, the better and accepted the proposal to resume their march south.

They were in Vicksburg that night and two nights later in Natchez. Big William dropped off troops to relieve the Texans and they reached the outskirts of Baker after a hard, three-day march. Fortunately, enough mounts had been found and the expedition was able to make good time.

During the march, they had seen several bands of horsemen, but there had been no skirmishes, much to Ishtar Singh's disgust. They were approached by a few of the locals who had managed to avoid the Mahdists and they reported that there had been little movement by the Mahdists and there had been no sign of patrols. No one knew who the riders were.

When they reached Baker, they found it occupied by a troop from the newly organized government of Louisiana. Bobby Preston, their leader, reported that the town had been hastily abandoned. Some of the locals said that the Mahdists had left three days ago and hurried to the east along I-10.

They rested for a day and set out the morning after, bolstered by the troop of Louisiana cavalry. The march was more deliberate and the rangers were sent well in advance of the main body. The Louisiana troop formed a screen to the south, along the coast. The Kansans served the same function to the north and Big William kept a contingent as rear guard.

The truck broke down on the second day and the artillery piece and its ammunition were transferred to teams of mules, whose loads had been redistributed.

Rangers began reporting activity at the old Naval Construction Center. Big William and Ishtar Singh were for mounting an immediate attack, but cooler heads prevailed and Zach led a squad from Fourth Rangers to the outskirts of town under a flag of truce. Big William and three other leaders from Mississippi joined him. As they waited for a response, the Second, Arkansas and Texas Rangers ghosted into town.

Just as they was about to give up and return to camp, a rider was spotted who was also carrying a white flag. They told Todd Spires to wait and advanced a hundred yards. The other rider approached and greeted Zach. They all dismounted and stood facing one another.

Zach sighed and finally said, "Your game's up. We know what you are trying to do. Baker, Natchez, Vicksburg and Greenville are all in the hands of the Free State of Mississippi. We have captured your governor and freed the janissaries and their families.

“We have over six hundred troops from Texas, Louisiana, Kansas, Arkansas, Jefferson, Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky and Mississippi. We have artillery and machine guns. We don’t want to fight, but we will wipe you out to a man if you force our hand.

“I’m willing to bet that you are not too sure of your own janissaries and that you have very few of your own troops left.”

The Mahdist gnawed on his upper lip and finally asked, “What do you offer?”

Big William answered, “Surrender and we won’t kill you-all. Don’t and we will scotch you like a nest of cottonmouths.”

“You will allow us to live in peace?”

Zach looked at the man in wonder. Here was the representative of a group which had tried to enslave the entire eastern section of the United States and, when they get caught at it, expect to be allowed to call King’s X and everything will be forgotten.

“No,” snorted Big William. “You can’t live in peace hereabouts. After you surrender, you get yourselves gone. We will march you up the road to your Caliphate. When you-all are gone, then we will do a little search and destroy and kill any of you we find hiding hereabouts. How’s them terms for you?

“You got exactly two hours to get your answer to us. After that we solve this little problem with guns,” he finished, mounting and riding off. The rest of the party joined him.

An hour later, the messenger was brought in with the message that they agreed to surrender, in order to avoid unnecessary suffering. He asked for two days to enable them to pack and ready themselves for the road.

Big William refused. Instead, he offered to let the man lead them into the Mahdist area and do an immediate search for weapons and contraband. Then they had one hour to prepare and

pack. He looked at his watch and said that anyone not in the holding area on the west side of the canal at Road 329 would be assumed to be hostile and would be attacked without mercy.

Zach looked at Big William in admiration at his assertiveness.

Duvane led his Mississippians behind the messenger and through the net of Rangers.

Two days later, Ishtar Singh and Ed Black, the Louisianans and Texans took their leave. They promised to send men to help train the Mississippians who had been freed from Gulfport. Ishtar Singh gave Zach and Leo bear hugs and made them promise to call him earlier next time.

When Zach asked after Hussein Conrad, he was informed that he and his band of followers were in Florida. The first batch of Mahdists gave the idea to plant a colony of radicals and take Mississippi River line. Zach offered the captives the choice to go to Florida or Iowa. Many of the new converts chose Florida, the rest of the expedition escorted the Mahdists up I-55, collecting the other northward bound prisoners along the way.

At I-40, Ralph Meeker and the Arkansawyers left and headed west. He promised to send trainers to Tennessee and Kentucky, as soon as he received the okay from his government.

The Kansans and Missourians with Zach, Leo and their Rangers cut west at U.S. 60. The Mississippians were reluctant to see them go. “We don’t know how to thank you, Zach,” said Big William. “If it weren’t for you, we would all be dead or slaves, now.”

“Well, you’re welcome, Bill,” answered Zach. “You have a lot of work to do. We’re leaving you a couple of radios. We will send back someone to help set up radio towers and do some training or whatever you need. Keep an eye on Benson and his reavers.

“You get yourself organized. This country is going to come back strong, you believe that. Help the folks in Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama or points east to get themselves organized or just make contact with them. Remember that there is a Jewish colony on Cuba and help any



who want to get there. Same goes for anyone wanting to join the New Africans or the Sioux or the Mahdists in Florida. If we help each other we will get it done.” They shook hands and departed.

Two weeks later, after a visit with John Benson and Gabriel and another with Raphael, they reached the Mound. At the turnoff to Mitchell, there was a large sign. Paul Diggs, who had been reading it, turned a grim face to the others. “Bad news, Zach. This says that there is plague in Mitchell. It tells everyone to stay out.”

Zach knew that they would have heard of this if they had not left their radio with Big William Duvane. He spat an expletive.

“All right. We are riding for Rio Grande. It’s the closest. We will find out what is happening, if they don’t have the plague, too.”

Grimfaced, they pushed south. At the turnoff to Rio Grande, they did not see a sign similar to the one near Mitchell. Paul volunteered to ride to the settlement and see how things were.

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## Chapter 23

### The Plague

*Spring/Summer 2050*

*I might as well write in this while I wait for Paul to get back. It's either that or wait around talking about this plague and worrying about home.*

*It looks like we have started something east of the Mississippi. There are groups organizing in that state, in Tennessee and Alabama. There is even a small contingent in Kentucky, though they said that there aren't many people left in the western part of the state. It seems that this or some other plague has been making regular visits.*

*I just hope that none of the Kentuckians brought it with them to Mississippi. I have to ask 'Doc' about a vaccine or cure, after this. Maybe we can get equipment and knowledgeable people to do some research. I wonder if 'Doc' White is even alive. Morbid thought.*

*Anyway, it is pretty interesting about Missouri and the Benson Reavers. Giving it more thought, it does sound like the Dark Ages. The people subsume themselves to a warlord who can protect them and they supply the fighters with food and goods. I wonder if any other areas have degenerated (?) to that, if degenerated is the right word.*

*Leo just gave me hell for being so calm about all of this. If I don't do something to take my mind off this, I will probably shoot someone.*

*So, with Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee organized, we should probably have some plan on sending in agents or apostles or whatever to areas not organized. Reminds me of the huge conversion effort by the Church in the Dark and Middle Ages. I wonder if we would have our martyrs, too.*

*I have to get new pictures taken of the family. Mine are too old.*

*We need better communication. We had some fine wireless equipment with pictures and text and voice, but they all depended on towers or satellites or something. I'll talk to Singleton about it, if he is still alive.*

*Crap, I can't concentrate.*

Several hours later Paul returned. "Everything here is fine," he said.

The rest of the column rode into Rio Grande and were greeted by John Mitchelson, the mayor. "Welcome. I wish I could give you some good news. 'Doc' White sent a message a week ago that they had an outbreak of some kind of virus or bug. Two days ago he warned us not to come in. He said it had spread to Big Valley and that was quarantined. There's been a few deaths, he said. Mostly kids younger than thirteen and older folks."

"Can I use the radio?" Zach asked. "I want to know how Sarah and the Ranch are doing. And Leo's family at the Lake."

"Sure, sure," John said and led them to the communication center

The operator reached Mitchell and the trooper on duty, Porter O'Malley, called Carl. While they were waiting, Porter told them that over half the town was ill and they had a couple of dozen dead. Zach put the transmission on speaker and asked for the names of the dead, if he knew of any. The troopers listened to the litany of the dead. Some, like Todd Spires heard about his son and sat in stunned silence. Others, hearing of dead children or parents, silently wept.

Carl came on the phone and expressed his condolences. Almost afraid to ask, Zach and Leo finally blurted out a question about the health of their family groups.

“The Ranch was in the middle of the foaling and breeding season and they stayed at home. Sarah had a wagonload of supplies brought in; because she knew that they would be busy.

“Leo, your family came down to help The Ranch. With all of the work, the kids were taken to The Lake and Leo’s sons and Adam Silver were sent to help. None of the boys were on duty when this thing hit.

“Oh, yeah, Zach. The reason they were short-handed; Karl got hurt when a mare kicked him. Broke his leg in two places. Anyway, Sarah and the girls took the kids to The Lake and the rest are at The Ranch. We called as soon as we knew it was bad and put the town under quarantine.”

Zach and Leo exchanged relieved looks. “Is there anything you need?” asked Zach.

Carl hesitated and asked him to put on the headphones. When Zach had done so, Carl told him that almost half of the troopers were down from the bug and most of the others were recuperating. “If there is an attack now, we are dead meat. Even the militia is in poor shape. ‘Doc’ said they could fight, but that would probably bring on a relapse and all cases of relapse have died.”

“Look, Carl, here’s what I’ll do. I’ll borrow a radio from Rio Grande and send Second and Fourth Rangers to the Mound. They will execute regular patrols. I’ll get Gunnison and Trinidad to each send up a troop to join the Rangers and have Taos replace the troop at Trinidad. How does that sound?”

“Great. You send the Rangers and I’ll call Gunnison, too. We have had some interference. If you can’t get through, send a runner. Thanks. Out.”

Zach had the operator try to connect to Gunnison or Trinidad. Gunnison didn't answer, but they got through to Trinidad. Ed Black, after hearing the situation, promised to have a troop on the move in an hour. He also promised to send a rider to Gunnison and apprise them of the situation and get a troop moving out of there. Zach warned him to make sure that there was no plague in Gunnison before he sent someone in.

Zach got off the radio and called Leo, the troop leaders and advisors in for a conference. He explained the situation and ordered the two ranger troops back to the Mound. He cautioned the troop leaders to keep the troopers busy and their minds occupied. He put Ihiro in overall charge until he could join them after organizing a regular schedule of supplies.

After they had left with a spare radio and a wagonload of supplies, Leo approached Zach. Before he could say anything, Zach said, "Leo, the reason I didn't send you with Ihiro is because I want you to get to The Lake and check up on things. They are going to need you to get fresh meat and keep things together. Anyway," he continued with a grin, "I'm sure that Cathy has a few things to say to you about being gone so long."

Leo gave him a hug and said, "Thanks, Zach. I'll let Sarah know you're safe and if they need anything, I'll make sure they get it. Don't you worry."

Zach saw Leo and two mule loads of supplies off on the cut-off over the mountain between U.S. 135 and Colorado Rt. 125. He then set about organizing regular shipments of supplies to the Mound. When he was finished, he traveled to Trinidad. On the way he met Twenty-three troop moving north. Mike Vaughn assured him that a Gunnison troop was only a day behind them.

When he reached Trinidad, he found the Gunnison Troop gathering a supply train for Mitchell. The citizens had set up a drop off point for clothing, supplies, food and a miscellany of

other items donated by the generous people of Trinidad and Gunnison. Zach thanked them before setting off over the mountain to Gunnison.

He pushed hard and reached the eastern defensive position at dark. The guards let him through and he slept for several hours in the barracks. Still weary, he mounted at dawn after a hasty breakfast and reached the capitol as the town was starting to stir.

Al Regado greeted him and led him into his office. Al ordered coffee and asked how the relief effort was going.

“The troops are on the move,” answered Zach. “I met the Trinidad and Gunnison troops on the road.”

“Yes and the Taos troop is due in any day. We are gathering supplies to send to Mitchell. We haven’t had any news since Ed Black sent in his man. I understand that almost half the people are down with this bug.”

“From what Carl says, there have been a couple of dozen deaths, mostly among the young or old. The worst thing is the time it takes for recuperation. After shaking off the sickness, the victims are weak and susceptible to relapse for, oh, sometimes a month. ‘Doc’ says that the relapse cases have all been fatal.

“That means that the recovery has to be as thorough as the cure. Carl indicated that three-quarters of the troop and militia have the plague or are recovering. If the Mahdists hit us now, they could walk in with their damned Purity Police and sweep us up.”

“What do they want us to do?” asked Al. “I mean, other than send the troop and supplies.”

Zach took a swallow of coffee before answering. “What we need to do is send runners to every settlement and tell them what is going on. I don’t want traders or travelers to stumble on a

plague town and somehow bring it back with them. Big Valley and Mitchell must be isolated. That means whatever or whoever you send in, doesn't com out.

"Since the doctors don't know how it spreads, any horses or mules or people; wagons, trucks or carts; anything stays put. So, can you send the Gunnison Rangers out to do that?"

"Sure, sure," answered the governor. He was about to send someone to find Don Massoglia, when he walked in.

The ex-policeman came right to the point. "What do you need?" he asked.

"Don, we need the rangers to warn every settlement about the plague in Big Valley and Mitchell. No one, and that means no one, is to go into the quarantine zone unless they want to stay there. I am issuing a shoot on sight order."

He turned to Zach. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. I think we need to warn our allies. Runners need to be sent to the Sioux, the Cherokee, Kansas, Arkansas, Texas, Californios, Mormons and the whole west coast. Though the Mormons could get the word out to the states north of Bear Flag. The Arkansawyers and Texans can spread the word east."

"We can handle that," said Don, taking notes. "What about our enemies? Do we want to let the Aztecs, Mahdists, New Africa and those Missouri reavers?"

"As nasty as this is, I am hesitant. I forgot the New Africans, have the Sioux warn them. Letting our enemies know is inviting them to attack. What do you think, Al?"

"I'm inclined to keep this to ourselves. If we can confine it to Mitchell and Big Valley and let it burn itself out, we won't even come into contact with other groups, allies or not. Oh, we need to warn them, I know, but low-key it."

“Typical politician talk,” Zach thought. He said, “We also need to keep patrols on all trails and roads into Big Valley and Mitchell. Both for our friends and enemies.”

“What do you plan on doing now, Zach?” asked Don, nodding agreement.

Zach thought a moment. What he wanted to do was follow Leo, but he felt that he had to go back to the Mound. “I suppose I will head for the Mound and see how things are shaking out there.”

Zach shook hands with Al and left with Don. The military commander of Gunnison had ordered that a truck be packed with supplies and two spare radios. “We’ll send your mount back with the next caravan, Zach. I figured that the truck would be faster. We threw your gear in the back, too.”

“Thanks, Don. I really appreciate this. Good luck to you and keep the bug out, huh?”

Zach, tired as he was, knew that he wouldn’t get any sleep and decided to leave immediately for Trinidad. Zach caught up with the caravan of wagons loaded with supplies for Mitchell as they reached the Mound, late that afternoon.

While troopers unloaded the truck, he met with leaders of Eighteen and Twenty-three Troops and Fourth Rangers. Second Rangers was on patrol. The main camp was in the Visitors Camp at the foot of the Mound. An observation post had been set up on the Mound. He laid out the command structure for them, first. Andy Newman would have overall command and Ihiro Masamoto would be in charge of the Rangers. “The main reason you are here,” Zach said, “is to protect the valley entrance. If we are attacked, get down to the Front Gate and hold. Whoever can support us from Mitchell will come, but we have to hold until they do. Otherwise, do not, under any circumstances, enter the Throat.

“Andy, this is your show.”



Newman cleared his throat and read out the duty roster and dismissed the men. He and Zach set up the radio and called Mitchell. Carl answered immediately. He informed them that ‘Doc’ was sick and they had three more deaths, but that fewer were falling victim to the plague. He apologized to Zach, but a storm had knocked out the phone lines to The Ranch and he did not have any news about Zach’s family.

After the call, Andy encouraged Zach to go and see about his family. When Zach hesitated, the commander said, “Zach, two things. With you here, I have a split command. The men are used to looking to you for orders and every one I give; they look at you for confirmation. Second, you are driving everyone nuts with you wandering around camp at all hours of the night.

“The sentries are liable to shoot you one of these times and then where does that leave me? Kind of like that guy responsible for shooting the General during the Civil War. They would probably hang me and the horse I rode in on.”

“All right,” Zach replied. “I’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

“No, you will leave in an hour,” insisted Andy. “Like as not, tonight will be the night you get shot. There’s enough daylight to reach Rio Grande. Get shot there and let them hang Jerry Carter.”

Zach showed the first sign of amusement since he got the news of the plague. He turned to find the truck had been loaded with his gear and Paul Diggs was standing next to the cab with the keys outstretched.

“You, too?” Zach snarled in mock anger as he snatched the keys from Paul’s hand.

He got in the car and drove south. He spent the night in Rio Grande and set out the next morning leading two mules and riding on another. He had been warned that the road was in poor shape, with the rains.

It took him two days to cross the mountains and he reached The Ranch weary and dirty. He spent the last night huddled under a brush shelter partially protected from a cold rain. As he rode through the last of the trees, he smelled wood smoke and heard his children's voices.

He paused, a lump in his throat and a stinging sensation in his nose. Wiping the moisture from his eyes, he kicked his heels into the flank of the mule and rode into the yard.

"Dad!" he heard. "Mom, dad's home and he's riding an old mule."

He dismounted into a sea of children. David Benton took his reins and he picked up Ed and Jacob and walked towards the house. Sarah had hurried to the edge of the porch, then stopped and covered her mouth with her hands. She ran down the stair and through the mud in her house slippers and hugged the three of them so tightly that the boys protested.

She stepped back, dashing the tears from her face with the heels of her hands. "I'm sorry boys," she said smiling. "Zach, I must look a mess."

Zach, ignoring his own tears, replied, "The most beautiful mess I ever have seen."

The houses and barns had erupted with the rest of the residents of The Lake and The Ranch. He was greeted with slaps, hugs and buffets from all sides. His children tugged at his clothes and everyone was talking at once. They carried him along like the tide as they moved towards his home and up the steps and through the door.

He found Cathy sitting in his chair, crocheting an afghan. When some order was restored, she said, "Carl said you were going to the Mound. Sarah was worried that you would try to get here through Mitchell. I tried to tell her that you were foolish, not stupid."

He turned to Karl. "He was supposed to let you know I was coming over from Rio Grande."

"He probably tried," answered the big man, "but we had to be almost at Mitchell before we would get any kind of reception and it finally went dead. We haven't had any contact for almost four days, now."

Sarah made Zach shower and change out of his clothes, which had gotten soaked riding through the dense forest. When he returned, there was food on the table and he told them what had happened since Leo got in.

When William asked if he got any bad guys, Zach insisted that he was miles away from any of the fighting. Sarah, who was walking behind him at the time, hit him gently on the back of the head with a dishrag and muttered, "I told you about lying to your children."

Leo told him about his own trip over the mountain. He had lost one mule when it slipped and fell into a rushing stream. He managed to save most of the supplies, but had to put the animal down. The head of the Appleton clan also said he saw fresh bear sign. The animal had marked a tree nine feet off the ground.

"Grizzly?" asked Zach.

"Beats me. I didn't see any clear tracks of the front paws to see if the claws were long or not. Whatever it was it was big. I was tempted to track it, but, well, I needed to get back. After the animals have finished dropping, maybe we can hunt it down."

"Relax, Daniel Boone," Cathy said. "You're too old to go running off after a bear that big. And, Zach, don't encourage him."

Leo shot her a sharp look, which she returned.

Later, Leo went out to the porch to have a smoke and nudged Zach to come along. Once alone, he broached the subject again. “I wasn’t planning on going after it for sport,” he insisted. “I was worried about the animals. That bear is probably looking to put on some meat after the long winter.”

Zach laughed, seeing through Leo’s altruism. “Bull. All you want is a shot at the bear. Coat it in sugar for Cathy, but you don’t fool me.”

The next day, Zach took a radio and contacted Mitchell. They reported that ‘Doc’ had managed to isolate a vaccine before he was stricken, but he didn’t want to inoculate because he was afraid that, as nasty as this bug was, he would reinforce anyone that was in the early stages of infection and cause a worse reaction.

Zach spent the rest of the day helping with the birthing and mating. They finished that evening and Leo brought up the subject of the bear hunt again.

It took a couple of hours of argument and some stiff promises, but Cathy finally relented. She snorted when Leo repeated his concern for the animals, but she let herself be convinced.

Karl, Leo, Eduardo and Zach left the next morning to track down the bear. Young William wanted to go and pouted when his mother, with Zach’s approval, refused his permission.

When he kissed her goodbye, Zach warned Sarah to keep an eye on their oldest. He was worried that the boy would try and follow them.

They reached the place where Leo had first seen signs and he began tracking the beast. The canopy of trees had preserved the trail from the rain and they were able to slowly work out the sign. They camped that night beside a fast running stream.

The sun broke through the clouds late the next morning. Leo was leading, working out the trail from the saddle. He rounded an outcropping of the mountain and several things happened at once. The others heard a roar and Leo's horse came bolting back down the trail, saddle empty. Eduardo, next in line, spurred his mount forward. Zach and Karl heard two quick shots as they fought their way around the packhorses. Karl, in the lead, slipped from his horse and around the granite obstruction. Zach saw him raise his shotgun, loaded with solid shot, and fire both barrels.

The force of the blast threw him off balance and his feet slid out from under him and he sat down in the mud, fighting to open the gun and replace the shells. Zach swung wide around him. He drew his .44 magnum and prepared to fire, but the bear was down, snapping at his wounds.

Zach dismounted and ran up to Leo. There was blood on the front of his shirt and down the side of his face. The bear reared up and Zach fired three shots into its gaping mouth as Eduardo fired into its side.

Karl, coated with mud, finally got his shotgun reloaded and covered the animal, but there was no need, it was dead. Zach bent over Leo and felt for a pulse. He determined that the old woodsman was alive just as he came out of his daze. Zach held him down when he struggled to rise, telling him that it was all over.

Eduardo handed Karl his medical kit and rode off to round up the pack horses and Karl's and Leo's mounts. Karl bent over the injured man and inspected his wounds. The bear's claws had raked his shoulder and cheek. Only Leo's quick reactions had saved him from sustaining more serious injuries. By the time they had cleaned, disinfected and bandaged the wounds, Eduardo had returned, herding the missing animals.

Zach brought more wood for the fire. The rains of the last few weeks had made it difficult to find dry wood and the fire smoked and sizzled. Eduardo took over the cooking chores and Zach and Karl inspected the carcass.

“It must have stood eight feet tall,” Karl observed. He pointed to the front claws and said, “It was a grizzly. Not good for the stock, if there are any more around. It was a crafty fellow, too. It knew we were hunting it and laid for us. Scarey.”

They got out their knives and cleaned and skinned the bear, knowing that Leo would want the skin, even if there were a few holes to patch. By the time they finished and cleaned up, food and coffee were ready. They ate while Leo slept off the sedative.

Karl gave him some painkillers when he woke and they got him onto his horse. They rearranged the supplies and packed the skin. It was a slow return, but they could see that Leo was suffering. When they talked of making camp, Leo insisted they continue on and get to The Ranch as quickly as possible.

Their weary horses stumbled into the yard just after midnight and they roused David to care for the mounts as Karl and Zach carried Leo into Zach’s house. The noise woke Sarah and Cathy and they immediately took charge. By the time Ed arrived, the women had Leo undressed and in bed.

They young veterinarian protested that he was a horse doctor as he gently soaked the bandages off the wound. Despite Karl’s efforts, the wound looked an angry red.

“He needs a doctor, Cathy,” Edward said, looking at the pale woman.

“You are all the doctor we’ve got, Ed,” she replied and pointed to her husband.

Ed shrugged and muttered, “Don’t be surprised if I inoculate him against hoof and mouth disease.” He got supplies out of the medicine chest Zach brought in. He shoed them all out of

the room except for Mary, Daniel's wife. She was training to be a nurse, but had returned home when 'Doc' White saw that her pregnancy would be difficult and she needed to stay off her feet and get plenty of rest.

The rest of the adults milled around the living room while Ed and Mary were working on Leo. Eduardo, Karl and Zach sat in a corner away from Cathy. They felt responsible for his injuries, even though Cathy said noting.

The women clustered around Cathy. They made tea and coffee and brought sandwiches and soup. Sarah sat next to the worried woman and held her hand.

Ed finally came out, drying his hands on a towel. Everyone jumped to their feet. He smiled and reassured Cathy that everything was going to be fine. The claw wounds had not been too deep and they had been sewn up. His collar bone had been broken and his back wrenched in the fall. "He will have to keep the arm immobile until the bone knits. I gave him a shot of antibiotics and some sedatives. He should sleep for six or seven hours. Cathy, he is one tough old bird. He'll pull through if you don't kill him first."

Cathy sniffed and went to watch over Leo. Zach announced that he was ready for bed, a sentiment that was seconded by all. When they were lying in bed, Sarah ran a finger along the scar on Zach's forehead. "Now you and Leo are twins," she said.

"Oh, yeah? Well, then I am the better looking one. And don't you go getting us confused. I am a fierce and jealous man."

"I'm shaking in my boots, darling, shaking in my boots," Sarah retorted and gave him a kiss good night.

Leo insisted that the bearskin be tanned, regardless of Cathy's attitude. She wanted to burn it. While Eduardo, Karl, Daniel, Jason and Zach made a gather of cattle to drive to Mitchell

and Big Valley, the boys hung the hide and began the arduous process of cleaning it. Leo sat in an old lawn chair smoking and giving instructions while the boys worked and the rest of the children watched.

As the cattle were being chivvied down the hill to town, Zach set up the radio and raised the communications center. Carl reported that the plague seemed to have run its course. There had been no new cases in the last few days. He paused for a moment and told Zach that there had been forty-four deaths, mostly among the young.

Carl asked that Zach communicate with Big Valley to see what their situation was like. Zach told him that he would and signed off. When they got to Big Valley, he found that they had lost eleven and no new cases had been reported. They requested flour, clothing and bedding, since they had been burning contaminated garments, sheets and blankets and the flour had been used for poultices on the lesions.

Sarah gathered up spare clothing and bedding and Zach sent the Appleton boys and Karl's adopted boys to Black Valley, Gold Cove, Rio Grande and Beaver Valley to ask for help. Daniel, who went to Rio Grande, sent off a message to Gunnison to apprise them of the latest developments.

A week later, 'Doc' declared the quarantine lifted and allowed outsiders into Mitchell as long as they were inoculated. He and John Singleton had managed to manufacture a large supply of the vaccine.

The bodies of the sick had been cremated immediately, but there was a memorial service for the victims of the plague. When it was over, Carl called a meeting of the Defense Committee.

"What do we do with the Mahdists?" he asked when the Committee had assembled.



Leo, his new scar livid, sat forward. “It’s obvious that there are two schools of thought with them. There are really some who don’t want to be a part of the radicals. We should encourage them to resettle in Florida. Get their manpower and skills away from the nest of Mahdists. Then, we have to finish the encirclement of the Mahdisst.

“We have the west, with the Sioux and the Kansans and us, and the south with Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky. We have to encourage them to help organize the Ohio and whoever to the Great Lakes.”

Ed Black spoke up when Leo was finished, “I don’t know about you guys, but I think we need to look at the bigger picture. We have a bunch of, oh, for a better term, little states, but nothing organized, really. We do have a sort of council with the western people, but when was the last time it even met?

“I guess the question I am asking is do we remain like we are or do we try to form up a, a country? Or should that be left to the Governor and Legislature?”

“Yeah, that is beyond us,” answered Zach. “Our problem is what to do with the Mahdists. By now they know that their little plan failed and Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky are getting organized...”

“And are friendly to us,” interjected Stretch Linder.

“Yeah, and are friendly to us,” continued Zach. “I imagine they would like nothing better than to wipe us out, but that wouldn’t give them anything except satisfaction, the wheels we set in motion wouldn’t stop if we weren’t on the scene.

“What I think we should do is act like nothing has happened and meet with the Mahdists, again. Talk peace and trade. Let them start the ball rolling, if they want a fight. We do what we seem to do best: supply training to the new, as Ed calls them, little states and encourage them to

help anyone further east organize. Set up trade and mutual defense treaties or agreements, but watch out for treachery.

“You have to admit, the fanaticism of the Mahdists is starting to crack. Three years ago we wouldn’t have heard of any of them trying to leave, now, ignoring the last Mahdist attempt to militarize the Mississippi, there is a colony in Florida. Whenever we get someone who wants to join them, I say we continue to give them a hand.”

Robert Agnello interjected, “So, Carl, let’s vote on it. I motion that we just ignore the Mahdists. We don’t need anything from them, anyway. Let’s just keep a close eye on them and we can meet any threat they pose.”

“Wait a minute,” Zach said, “I proposed meeting with them, not ignoring them.”

“Sure you did, Zach,” answered Robert, “but I don’t see the point. We can’t trust them and I don’t want to deal with them. Let them live or die on their own. I agree with encapsulating them, but let them wither on their own vine.”

There was a heated discussion on the motion, which was seconded by Julius Rosaia. Zach and a few others, opposed the motion, but it was carried and forwarded to the Legislature.

Zach, Karl and the Appletons gathered up their families and headed back to the Ranch. Once there, Cathy started packing for the move back to the Lake. At first, she refused to take the bear pelt, but Leo put his foot down and it was included.

That evening, after dinner, when they were all sitting around enjoying a gentle evening, Karl observed, “You know, when I was working in the Aztec mines, I never thought of having all of this. Friends, family and a place to call home.”

Leo lit his cigarette and nodded. “Yup. Whatever happens in the world outside, we’ve got each other and a good life.”

Cathy stretched and said, “I don’t care if we reform the United States again or not. What it really comes down to is the people around us. Sure, it’s good to have a community big enough for defense, but there isn’t much more that we need that we can’t make or manage ourselves.”

Sarah snuggled against Zach and asked, “What’s going to happen now?”

Zach finished lighting his pipe and answered, “Well, darlin’, we will probably have a dozen more kids and live happily ever after.”

She punched him and he became serious, “Ouch. I imagine that we, Jefferson, will keep helping the disorganized parts of the country. We’ll get organized someday into a country again, though I think that everyone is pretty content with this loose confederacy. There will be trade and we will start to see industry and railroads and organization. And, I’m not sure that I will like it. We will have to put up with taxes, politicians and the fight against a strong central government.

“However, that is in the future. I like it like it is, myself. A lot of the stress and strain is gone, except for people trying to kill us,” he joked.

Kay, suckling young Michael, observed, “It’s peaceful here and I want it to go on forever. I want all of us to stay like this, no going off again and fighting.

“Leo and Zach and Karl and Eduardo deserve peace and quiet. Ed, David, the Appletons can continue to work and build and make a better life for us. And we can work with them, you know.

“Oh, I don’t know how to say it, but you know what I mean.”

Mary hugged her co-wife and said, “We know what you’re trying to say.”

Zach puffed on his pipe and looked around at his friends and family, the mountains and the stars starting to show with the setting of the sun and knew that here was home for the rest of his days.